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FANTASY

Magazine
Issue #31

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Connie Hirsch
An interview with
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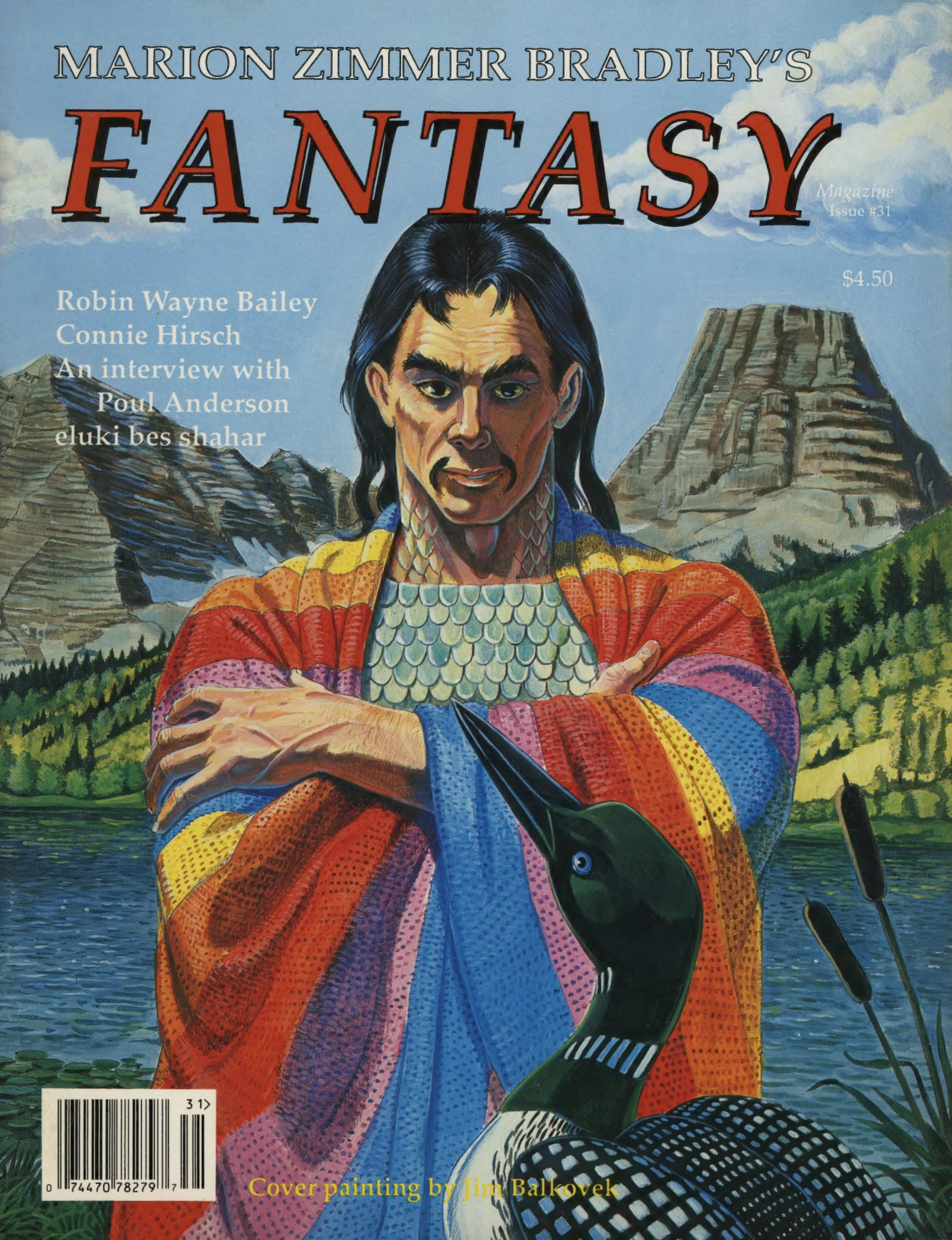

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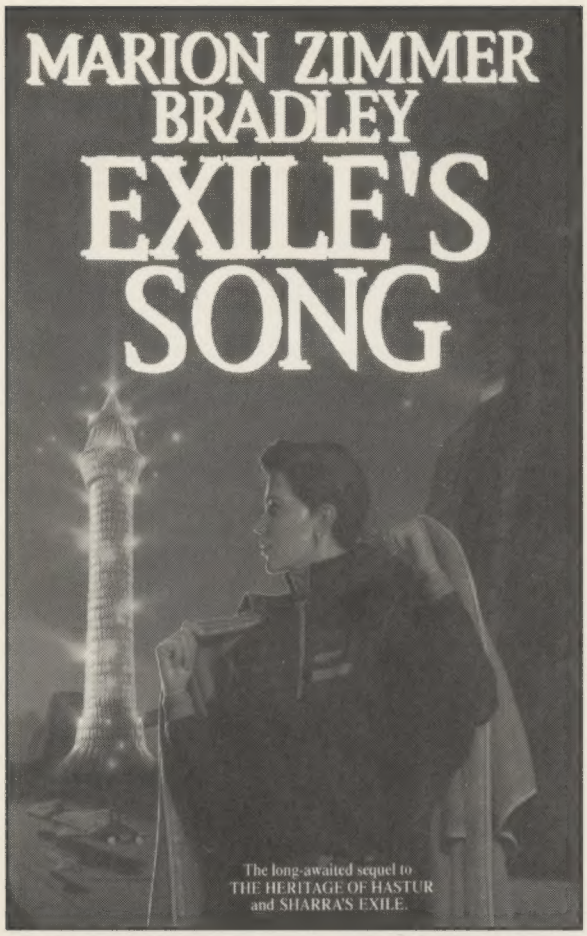

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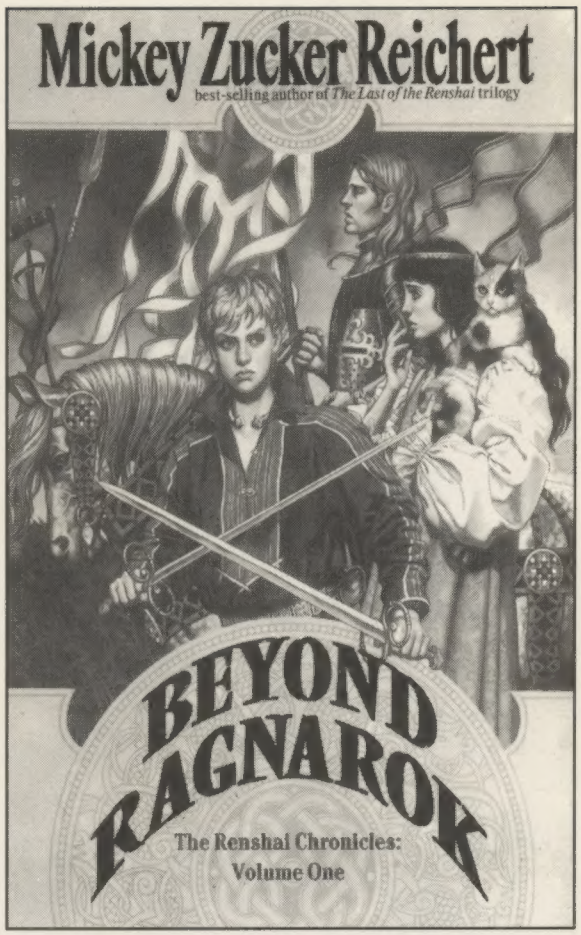

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Fans are Friends Forever

I have just received a report now, as I sit at this keyboard trying to think what to write for an editorial, that Elsie Wollheim has died. Of course, Elsie had been ill so long that it certainly comes as a merciful release; but it is surely the end of an era. In my mind, Elsie and Don Wollheim had become something like surrogate parents to a whole generation of us fifties fans. As a generation, we tended to be the product of dysfunctional families. It was, however, a time when people with dysfunctional families were not recognized or supported but rather counseled to be glad we *had* parents. The schools and the law were all on the side of the parents and usually told the complaining teenager that she should be glad she had a family — no matter how bad. (Of course, this was also the age when the mother would get blamed for every child's misery, if the authorities went so far as to admit those miseries existed.)

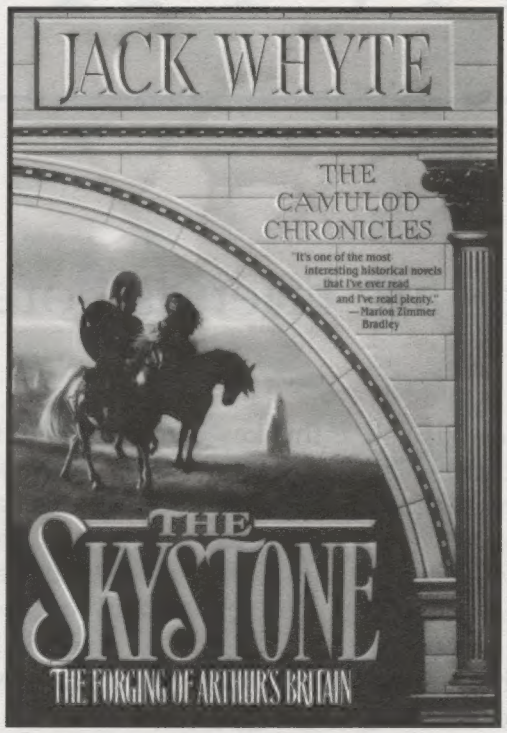
But science fiction fandom gave us the family we wished we had had. Don and Elsie Wollheim nearly invented fandom; I don't expect it will ever recover from their loss. That generation of SF people were a special phenomenon of the early atomic age when we thought all problems of the world would be solved or destroyed by science, and the writing was a way to test it to destruction. Only other fans could truly understand us, and every convention was like a family reunion.

Now I like to think that Don and Elsie Wollheim, Brad, my first husband, and Walter, my second, and so many others are all enjoying what I like to call "That Big Convention in the Sky". It will be like the Wollheims' well-remembered parties; they were in a wonderful tradition. Plenty of great food — writers are always hungry. Despite all the traditions of hard-drinking fans, they provided no drinks but coffee and various soft drinks, and nobody ever complained. On the contrary, the DAW parties were famous, and for all I know, so were the Ace ones before them.

So I hope to meet them all there: Don and Elsie hosting, Walter, my dear Randall Garrett dropping endless puns, Brad, Rick Sneary, the four or five Kennedys of the thirties and forties, Kelson making costumes, and so on. Fandom. We'll be drinking sodas, laying down the law, speechifying, and solving all the problems of this world and the next.

Marion Zimmer Bradley

"It's one of the most interesting historical novels that I've ever read and I've read plenty." —Marion Zimmer Bradley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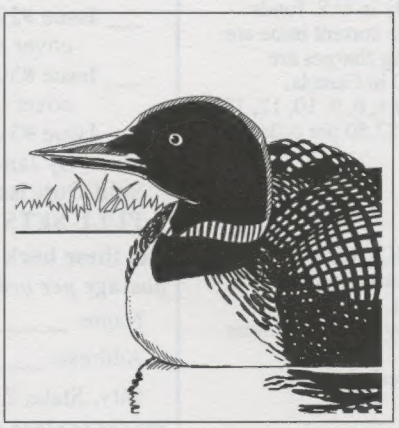

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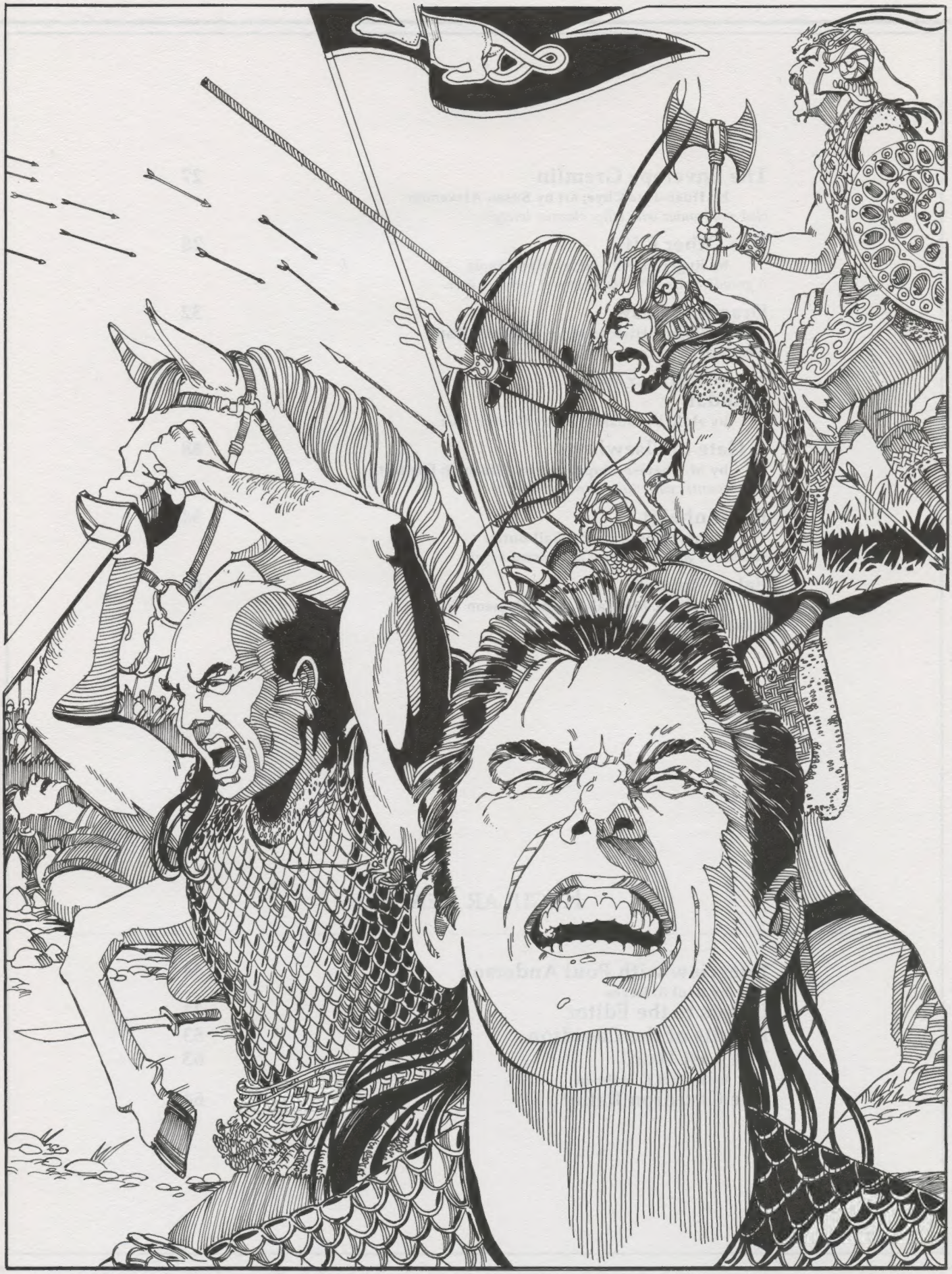

Artwork by James Balkovek

THE WEEPING LOON

by Robin Wayne Bailey

For as long as I could remember, the lake had dominated all my thoughts and all my dreams. From the doorway of our cottage high atop the hill I could see it. It filled the valley below. A tenuous mist drifted perpetually over its silvery surface. Dark reeds and cattails shivered gently in the lapping water and trembled in the breeze that never quite died. They seemed to beckon to me, those reeds, and the smell of the lake was ever in the air like a strange perfume.

"Karithe?" Mama paused from her knitting as she spoke to me. It was only a little past dawn, but already she was hard at work in her chair by the window. She liked the morning's light best for detail work, she said. She would be there all day, though, as she was every day, surrounded by skeins of colored yarn and half-finished pieces.

"Yes, Mama?" I answered as I leaned in the open doorway. The breeze rumpled my hair. Far away, I could hear the cattails whispering.

"You're daydreaming again, child," Mama said, as she resumed her work. The needles clacked softly against one another. The scarf on her lap grew by another row in the time it took me to draw a deep breath and let go a sigh.

"Sorry, Mama," I apologized. "All my chores are done. I was just resting."

A faintly indulgent smile lit Mama's face briefly. She seemed to smile so rarely any more. She was getting old. Yet she never rested. Her knitting was all that stood between us and utter poverty. From sunrise to sundown she knitted, and on the first day of every month we'd make the long trek to Chepak Village to sell her handiwork. She had a skill like no one else's with the needles, and the villagers loved my mama.

I left my place in the doorway, and pulled over a stool to sit near her feet. My needles were in a basket close by, smaller needles made to fit my small hands. For a while, I tried to knit a few rows on the shawl that had been my bane for the past year. I didn't have Mama's diligence, though, nor her patience. Several times she stopped me and corrected a stitch or explained a technique. Finally, I wadded up the silly mess and thrust it aside.

"You'll get a few coins for it when it's done," Mama said encouragingly. The sun spilled through the window, and one side of Mama's face shone with an ivory light. The silver hair near her temple sparkled. Her hands never stopped moving.

"I'm going for a swim," I announced, standing up. That was my talent, not knitting. I loved to swim. I was faster in the water than anybody. Sometimes in Chepak, I would race the boys across the river that ran by the village. I always won.

The needles paused. Mama looked up again and bit her lip. "Stay away from the lake, Karithe." It was not an order, really. Mama never ordered me. It was not even a warning. Rather, she seemed to beg, and a nervous fear clouded her pale gray eyes. Whenever I mentioned the lake or went near it, that same look stole into her gaze. "You're just a little girl," she continued. "And it's much too deep for you."

"I'm not a little girl any more, Mama," I answered, trying to hide my annoyance. "Old Ebard down in the village said it wouldn't be much longer now before the boys would come out here courting."

Mama sat back and gave a little sigh. "That's true enough, daughter," she admitted with a tiny little grin that I didn't quite understand. "But you'll have to stop out-running, out-swimming and out-wrestling them."

"What?"

Mama resumed her knitting, but her irritating little grin lingered as if she knew some secret she wasn't yet ready to share with me. "Never mind," she murmured. "Go for your swim, and let me do my work. But stay away from the lake, and be back for your evening chores." Clack-clack went her needles, and she never looked up at me again.

The hillside was covered with white moonpoints and spiderwort flowers. Bees and grasshoppers scattered as I wandered down through the thick grass. Once I stopped and glanced back at our cottage to see Mama through the

Artwork by James Balkovek

window. Her head never lifted, yet I could tell she was watching me. I loved her, but she worried too much.

Midsummer was approaching. The sun almost burned on my neck as I made a course northward without going near the lake. I didn't swim there. I used the river that fed the lake, instead. Mama said that was safe. We used to draw our water from there, too, walking the mile or so, until Old Ebard came out and dug our well. Likewise, we only fished in the river, never in the lake. Most of the sky was a flawless blue, but in the south a huge fleecy cloud perched over Tabletop Mountain. Unlike most of the mountains, which rose to tall peaks, Tabletop was completely flat. I knew the legend the villagers told about it, and about the lake.

A great battle had been fought in this valley long ago when only the river wound among the hills. Forces from great Kamath in the west and Surmassus in the north had squeezed down into this isolated little corner of the world.

Somewhere among these hills, however, the witch Charlathe had lived in quiet isolation with her only child, Ibis. The little boy had never seen another human except his mother. Against her warnings, he slipped away, stole too near the fighting, and took an arrow through his heart.

Charlathe's grief knew no limits. Nor did her rage. Calling on long unused powers, she shaved the top from a mountain and sent it tumbling downward to dam the river. She did not care whose arrow had killed her son. She held both armies guilty and drowned them all, letting not a single soldier escape.

I didn't doubt the legend's truth. The lake and Tabletop Mountain were proof of its veracity. And sometimes, late at night, I could hear Charlathe weeping, haunting the lake, with a sound like the loons that dwelled in the reeds along the banks.

I began to pick the moonpoint and spiderwort, making a bouquet. The river seemed like a long way off today, and I guess I didn't really want to swim. The flowers smelled lovely, and the constant humming of the bees and the warmth of the sun made me feel kind of lazy. I glanced toward Tabletop Mountain again and thought of Ibis. It would have been nice to have a friend my age in the valley.

Without quite planning it, I found myself on the shore of the lake. I wasn't afraid. I'd been here before. I'd even sat on the bank and dangled my feet in the water to prove I wasn't afraid. Mama didn't like it, but she knew my curiosity. She only insisted that I never swim in the lake.

Besides, it wasn't my fault. Blame it on the bouquet of flowers. The moonpoint and the spiderwort needed a cattail and some broadleaves to offset

it. Then it would look nice on the dining table. Rather than swim, I would go home and make lunch for Mama. I felt rather guilty about running around all day while Mama worked so hard. Maybe it was a sign I was growing up, or just that I hadn't done anything really nice to surprise her in a long while.

A pair of loons fluttered upward with startled cries as I approached a thick crop of cattails. The ground was rather marshy. I took off my slippers and gathered the hems of my skirts and tucked them into my waistband, exposing my legs from the knees down. Leaving slippers and flowers on the bank, I waded a few paces into the water to find the best reeds and broadleaves. There was one particular cattail with a fine white cottontop that caught my eye. Yet as I reached for it, sunlight gleamed on a huge spiderweb stretched between two tall reeds. Its fat occupant waited, perfectly still, eyeing me.

Despite myself, I jumped away. But beside me there was another web and another spider. I screamed and ducked low under it. Webs and spiders everywhere! I'd walked into some kind of nest! Panicked, I spun toward the shore, but I was surrounded by reeds and cattails. How had I wandered so far? Where was the shore?

Then, with a squawk, I slipped. The lake rushed over me. Water filled my nose and mouth. But at the same time, I grew calmer. Underwater, I was safe from the spiders, and I was a good swimmer. Hugging the bottom, I kicked away until I cleared the reeds and found open water. Only then did I surface and grab a breath of air.

My skirts floated up around me. I treaded water and searched for a clear point of land without reeds or cattails where I could climb out. When I saw such a place I made straight for it with my best stroke. This water was cold, far colder than the river that fed the lake!

Just as I was about to climb out, I gave another short scream. Something even colder suddenly wriggled down inside my blouse! Ouch! And it had sharp fins! Scrambling out, I whipped my top off as fast as I could. A plump, silver fish fell out and flopped helplessly on the grass.

"Lunch!" I shouted, delighted. There was a nice surprise for Mama! I made a grab for the fish before it could flop its way back into the lake. It shot between both my hands as I squeezed it, but landed farther up on the bank away from the water. I made another grab, then pushed it with my toe, farther and farther from the water, until it lost most of its energy and just lay there, gasping.

This was great, I figured. I'd intended to make lunch for Mama, but that would have been bread and cheese, and a tiny bit of last night's vegetable stew. Now, I could take her hot fish, instead. I had to take off my clothes and let them dry, anyway, or Mama would be angry. So I had time to build a fire and cook it. Then I could wrap it in broadleaves and carry it back to the cottage with the bouquet.

In no time I had a fire going. Naked, I squatted by the edge of the lake and watched the fish grill on a spit over the crackling flames. A little smoke rose up, and a rich aroma, but I was sure Mama wouldn't see or smell anything. Meanwhile, the hot sun and the breeze were quickly drying my garments on the limbs where I'd hung them.

I hadn't realized how hungry I felt. As the fish popped and sizzled, I leaned closer and inhaled the cooking odor. I couldn't help myself. Though it burned the tips of my fingers I pinched off a tiny piece of flesh, blew off the steam and pushed it into my mouth. It was so sweet! I lifted the spit from the flames and pinched off a second piece and ate it.

Before I realized what I'd done, the entire fish was gone! As if awaking from a trance, I stared at the pile of bones at my feet and the grease on my hands and fingers. "Mama's lunch!" I cried in despair. What had I done? "Now the whole surprise is spoiled!"

A cackling laughter suddenly filled the air. "Oh, I wouldn't exactly say that, you foolish child!" The pile of fish bones shifted and rearranged themselves. I watched, too stunned to run away, as flesh reappeared, and fins and silver scales. But the transformation didn't stop there. The fish, alive once more, flopped upright on its tail, sprouting legs as it began to grow. Fins became arms, and the silver scales became the gleaming armor of an ancient Kamathian warrior.

I screamed and tried to flee. Too late, I realized I had no voice at all, nor could I move. The warrior held me in absolute thrall with his cold, unblinking fish-eyed stare, and he spoke to me with a mouth that had not quite reclaimed its human shape.

"Long have the spirits of the lake watched you, little one," the creature said, "and now I have you. By eating me you have given me power over you." The warrior lifted his head, and the sunlight shimmered on a line of argent scales along his throat. "You are only a small fish, though. Not the one we want. Bring us Charlathe, that she might set us free!"

"Char—," I managed the merest whisper. "Charlathe is long dead!"

The Kamathian pointed a slender, webbed finger of accusation. "So you would lie, child!" He hissed angrily. "Very well, little fish. She will come fast enough when she sees the change I have wrought upon her precious Ibis!"

An evil hand stretched out toward me. I tried to scream again, but once more my voice was gone. My senses swirled, and a strange fire seared my body. Through burning eyes I watched horrified as my fingers transformed into feathers and my arms into wings. This time when I screamed a shrill, high-pitched cry issued forth.

The Kamathian spirit bent down. Webbed hands reached out, pinned my wings to my side and lifted me. "What a pretty little bait you are!" It cackled. "Charlathe will come when she sees you now!" He threw me high into the air. "Fly, my little loon, fly to your mother!"

I spread my new wings, catching the wind currents as I soared far out over the lake. But I took no joy in the marvel of flight. My heart pounded with fear and desperation. I cried and cried with my loon voice, pleading with the spirits of the lake to change me back. All around the lake, loons rose up from their nests among the reeds to join me, taking up my cry, until the air was a chorus of weeping.

The Kamathian only turned and walked back into the lake and disappeared beneath the waves. A little circle of ripples radiated outward from the place where the tip of his helmed head submerged.

I screamed again, despondent, as I gyred away from the lake and flew toward home. Mama would know what to do. She always knew. Over the hills I raced, skimming the fields of moonpoint and spiderwort, straight for the cottage and through the open door.

Mama gave a whoop of surprise. Knitting needles and yarn went in all directions. "Wretched bird!" she shrieked, leaping out of her chair. She

grabbed a broom from the corner near the door and swung it with all her aged might. "Don't you dare mess my house! Get out! Get out!"

"Mama!" I cried, but a meaningless bird-sound was all that came from my throat. I fluttered under her swing, darting to the other side of the cottage, but she chased me, swinging the broom. Again, I dodged her blow, and perched on the mantel. "Mama, help me!" The broom thumped down forcefully, knocking over an unlit candle, sending an unused ball of yarn spinning, unraveling across the cottage floor. In a cloud of loose feathers, I sprang back into the air.

Straight into her next swing. *Whump!* Stars and bright lights exploded in my head, and pain flashed through my strange new body. I hit the floor, weakly flapping my wings, trying to fly. Mama bent over me, and I watched the broom rise again. I was about to die. Mama was going to kill me!

Then the broom hesitated. Mama bent closer, and a curious expression stole over her lined and wrinkled face. "Whatever kind of loon has such blue eyes?" she exclaimed.

I opened my mouth and cried with a plaintive sound, staring upward at her. She set a hand to her lips in puzzlement. I had to let her know who I was. But how? With a bird's quickness, I spied my own knitting needles in the basket where I had left them by the shawl I had been working on. I fluttered across the room to the basket, seized one of the needles in my beak, flew back and dropped it at Mama's feet. Then I flew to the mantel again and gave another cry.

The broom fell from Mama's numbed grip and clattered on the floor. She bent and picked up my small knitting needle and clutched it to her heart. "Karithe!" she cried in sudden anguish. "What have you done?"

I let go a long, mournful wail, the closest I could manage to an explanation in my present form.

Mama clutched my needle in both hands as she came closer. Fat tears rolled down her cheeks. "I begged you not to go near the lake, daughter! I warned you about evil spirits! Look at you!"

She paced back and forth, the boards of the old floor creaking under her every step. Finally, she took down her shawl from the peg where it hung on the wall, threw it around her shoulders and made for the door. "Come on, Karithe. Show me where this happened!"

I sprung off the mantel, leaving a deep scratch in the wood with one of my talons. Mama would be angry about that later. I flew out the door, and she hurried right behind, mumbling and scolding me with every step. Down the hill I flew as swiftly as my wings would take me. Then, perched in a tree, I waited for her to catch up.

Halfway down the hill she found an old black limb lying in the grass, stout enough to use for a cane. With its help, Mama doubled her pace again. The sun fairly sparkled in the gray strands of her hair, and the myriad colors of her shawl swirled around her shoulders.

"Don't dawdle up there!" Mama scolded as she caught up. "Lead on, lead on!"

She was sweating and out of breath by the time we reached the lake. A wisp of smoke curled up from my small cookfire, which was now no more than glowing ashes. I landed in the grass, fanning my wings, and let go a long screech. Across the lake another loon answered.

Mama folded her arms as she gazed at the fire and shook her head. "Foolish girl," she muttered. "Foolish girl!" She strode down the bank to the very edge of the water. For a moment, she just seemed to stare into its blue depths. Then she raised a frail fist and shook it. "Get out here!" she demanded in a thin voice that quavered with anger. "You get out here right now! I don't have all day to waste on this silly business!"

Somehow, I didn't think it was a good idea for Mama to take that tone with my tormenter, but I couldn't very well tell her that. Far out on the lake, a large silver fish leaped out of the water, cutting a glimmering arc in the air before it splashed back into the water. Again, it leaped and fell back. Plainly, though, it was coming our way. With a cry, I flew up to perch on a high limb. Mama, though, stood her ground on the bank, hugging her shawl around her shoulders as she tapped her foot impatiently in the grass.

Yet again the fish leaped out of the water, but at the apex of its leap it changed shape and became the Kamathian warrior I knew so well. His booted feet touched lightly on the sun-dappled surface, and he walked ashore.

He looked with cool disdain at my mother. "You're not Charlathe," he observed.

Mama whacked him on the shoulder with her walking stick. When the stick passed through him, as if he were no more than vapor, she pretended not to notice. "Of course not, you stupid spirit!" she snapped. "Charlathe's been dead for two hundred years! Some of that water must have seeped into your brain!"

I gave a shrill bird-cry. *Don't make him mad, Mama!* I wanted to tell her. *Just make him turn me back!*

The Kamathian looked genuinely disappointed. "Only Charlathe can set us free from the lake."

Mama leaned on her cane and glared up at the taller figure. "You've got that right," she answered without sympathy. "So you just might as well let my daughter go. She's no use to you."

The spirit ignored her. A spectral hand with webbed fingers reached out and touched her shoulder. "A beautiful shawl," he said. "I have not seen such colors in many many years. Underwater, colors are muted and dull." He looked away from the shawl and stared hard and deep into Mama's eyes. A cold, untrusting light gleamed in his black pupils. "How do I know you are telling the truth, old woman?" he demanded, pulling his hand away.

Mama spat scornfully on the grass near his boots. "Look around," she ordered, raising her stick in the air as she half-turned. "Look at the trees. They're tall and thick. They're old! Some are already dead, dead as you!" She faced the spirit again. "But this was just an empty valley before Charlathe dammed the river and made the lake. Not a tree, not a flower or a blade of grass. You Kamathians and Surmassians had flattened everything with your endless battles!"

The spirit gazed slowly around the shoreline and slowly nodded. "Yes," he agreed at last. He turned his head a little, and sunlight glinted on the scales along his throat. "Many years. I see it now."

"Then let my daughter go," Mama asked again, her voice softening somewhat.

The Kamathian grew quiet for a long moment, and I wondered if a spirit could shed tears. It was hard to read the emotion behind those unblinking, fishlike eyes. Once more, he reached out and touched Mama's shawl.

"Make me such a garment," he said at last, "with colors even brighter than

this to brighten my life on the lake bottom. Then, perhaps, I might let her go."

"'Perhaps'?" Mama snapped, glowering. "'Might'?"

The spirit waded down the bank into the water. "I promise nothing," he replied without looking back. "Please me with your workmanship, and I might allow you to ransom the child."

"'Might', again!" Mama grumbled as the creature disappeared under the surface. The ripples of his passage shattered on the shore. She thumped the end of her makeshift cane on the ground and looked up at me. "Back to the cottage, Karithe!" she called. "There'll be no stopping for supper tonight!"

I'd never seen such a look of anger and determination on my mother's face before. She climbed the hill as if she was attacking it, striking the earth with the tip of her walking stick with every step, cursing the bees and grasshoppers that sprang up in her path. At the cottage, she flung the door open and went straight to her chair by the window. Immediately she began to take stock of the balls and skeins of yarn piled by one side of her workspace.

The sunlight was beginning to fail as her needles started to click. Row upon row emerged as her fingers flew in tight little circles and purls. Shadows stretched across the yard outside, then crept silently into the cottage, itself, taking up residence, as if to watch her work.

Perched on the mantel I watched until she paused long enough to rub a thumb over her strained eyes. There was little I could do to help, but I fluttered over to the dining table and snatched an unlit candle from its holder. Flying back, I dropped it in her lap.

"What?" she squawked, startled. So involved in her labors, she hadn't even seen me move. I settled on the mantel again as she picked up the candle. "Yes, you're right, Karithe." She set her needles and yarn aside and rose stiffly. "A little light would help." Rubbing one hand over her lower back, she went around the room, gathering all the candles and lighting them from the fireplace coals, which were never allowed to quite die out. Soon, the cottage was ablaze with a rich amber glow.

"Watch those claws, girl!" Mama said as she settled back into her chair and picked up the needles. "Scratch that wood, and I'll tan your tailfeathers! That mantel's been in my family a long time!"

Artwork by James Balkovek

I fluttered away and found a new perch on the edge of the table.

"Don't scratch that, either," she muttered without looking up. The needles began to fly again.

Exasperated, I flew through the air and settled on the back of her chair. Mama let go a soft, bothered sigh and said nothing. I watched as she worked. Never had I seen her needles move so rapidly. The yarn fairly sang as it unwound from the skeins. Blues and yellows, fire-bright oranges, reds all flowed together into one dazzling splash. Yarns she had been saving for years, expensive yarns colored with expensive dyes went into the work.

Then I saw the droplets of red splattered among the bright colors and let go a loon-cry of dismay. She was bleeding! The yarn had made numerous cuts on her fingers, but still she worked in silence without pause. All for me!

"Stop that weeping!" she ordered without looking up. "You're getting me wet!"

It was true. Human tears leaked from my loon eyes and fell on her hair and shoulders. I couldn't take the watching any longer. I flew out the door and into the night, hearing my name called be-

hind me. I didn't stop, but climbed higher and faster into the darkness toward the stars, toward the vast yellow moon. The wind rushed past my wings, and my heart beat with a power and speed, threatening to burst.

In the distance, the lake gleamed. Why had I never seen it before? It was more than an effect of moonlight. Every diamond sparkle on every ripple was a soul, the doomed soul of a Kamathian or a Surmassian warrior struggling to escape, struggling for two hundred years as they would for all eternity. I wept for fear and self-pity and let go a wretched cry of loneliness. Once again, another loon answered, then another. Then the night was full of loons climbing out of the reeds and the trees to take wing above the lake. They flew close, their wings brushing mine as if to assure me I was not alone. From one end of the dark valley to the other we flew, 'round and 'round, filling the night with our cries.

When dawn lit the tops of the eastern hills I left my new friends and returned to my mother's door. Half the candles had burned out, and little remained of the others but melting stumps. Mama still sat in her chair by the window, but her head hung lightly down on her old bosom, and her eyes were closed. Spread upon her lap was the most beautiful shawl I had ever seen.

I didn't wake her. I had worn the form of a loon this long. It wouldn't hurt to wear it a bit longer. As quietly as I could, I flew up to the mantel and waited. The morning light seeped gently in through the window and lent a radiance to Mama's face, and I felt a rush of warmth and love for her.

Suddenly her head jerked upward and her eyes snapped open. "Karithe?" she called automatically. She hadn't spotted me yet. I gave a squawk to let her know I was home. There was a flash of worry in her eyes, followed by relief. Then she looked at me sternly. "Don't scratch the wood," she warned as she struggled up out of her chair. She held the shawl up to the light and examined it with a critical squint. "What do you think?" she asked.

I fluttered my wings, shaking a few feathers loose. They drifted into the sunbeams and shimmered for a moment, catching the light before settling to the floor. It was surely the most splendid of garments. There was but one flaw that I could detect, a long piece of yarn that trailed from the finishing row. She had forgotten to clip it with the shears.

"You're right," Mama answered, draping the shawl over one arm as she headed for the door. "Gods-awful gar-

Artwork by James Balkovek

ish, but let's go see what our Kamathian friend thinks and get you restored to normal. You're molting all over the furniture."

Down the hill I flew again with Mama hurrying behind as quickly as she could. In all my life I'd never seen Mama go near the lake. Now she was making the trip for the second time in as many days for my sake. It fascinated me to watch her as she came down through the fields of moonpoints and spiderwort flowers with the bees and insects humming around her and the sun shining in her hair. For an instant she seemed almost like a young girl again, spry of step, full of life and purpose. I had never thought of Mama that way. She had always just been Mama to me, and she had always seemed old.

I wondered how I would ever repay her. I wondered if I would get the chance to try.

The ashes of my cookfire were stone cold now, just a black powdery circle on the green lakeshore. A few leaves floated down from the branches above as I took my perch on the lowest limb of the tree that grew nearby. Mama walked right down to the edge of the water and held up the shawl. The silvery surface mirrored an image of it, and the waves shivered with color.

The Kamathian spirit rose out of the lake and walked to the shore, his round fish-eyes burning as they fastened on the shawl. "Never have I beheld such a wonder, old woman," he said, his thin lips popping as he spoke. He extended a webbed hand. "Give it to me."

Mama drew back. "First," she insisted, "restore my daughter to her rightful form."

A narrow grin spread over the spirit's face. "Do you not trust me?"

Mama spat with open contempt. "Trust a Kamathian? You would not be where you are now if you Kamathians and Surmassians had kept your word and left this land out of your stupid wars as you had promised."

The Kamathian bristled, his unblinking eyes darkening with anger. "Blame our generals and our leaders if you must, you hag. Some of us but went where we were ordered as soldiers have always done. Give me the shawl. It will brighten the endless misery of my days and nights. Then I'll restore your daughter."

Mama glared, hesitating. Finally, realizing she had no choice, she relented. "Let me place it about your shoulders," she said, holding the shawl up. He nodded, turned, and allowed her to drape it about him.

A strangely sweet light came into his face as he lifted his arms and admired his new shawl. He went to the edge of the water and studied his reflection, beaming. It hung upon him like a regal mantle, nearly brushing the grass, and he hugged it close about himself, as if it was the first real warmth he had known in centuries.

"Now keep your bargain, creature," Mama insisted. "Restore my daughter."

The Kamathian glanced up at me, then answered with a scornful look. "I think not, old woman. I may need many more such garments. My friends on the lake bottom will burn with envy."

I gave a loud cry and beat my wings in fury. My talons dug with frustration into the tree bark, and for the first time I felt their true power. He had done this to me, this evil spirit, transformed me into this horrible bird, and now he was cheating my mother! I dove out of the tree, screeching, aiming for his eyes.

And passed right through his suddenly intangible form. He threw back his head and laughed. The sharp sound of it rolled over the lake, startling the other loons in their quiet nests, sending them gyring into the air.

With a speed that belied her age, Mama made a grab for the single long piece of yarn at the end of the shawl's finishing row. It was not an overlooked flaw after all! She gave it a yank. It didn't break. The corners suddenly drew together, closing about the Kamathian, trapping and binding him. She gave it another yank, drawing it tight.

"What are you doing?" the spirit screamed, writhing, all his power apparently useless. "Let me go!"

Mama shook her head and yanked on the line again. "For all that you're a spirit," she scolded sharply, "you're still just a glorified fish. Well, I've made a glorified fishnet to hold you, sir! And you'll not escape until you've restored my daughter! Now be quick about it! I'm old, and my patience isn't what it used to be!"

The Kamathian tried to break free, but the knitted weave was too strong. He flung himself to the ground and tried to roll into the water. With surprising strength, Mama braced her feet, clung to the line and dragged him back. Finally, the creature gave a loud sob and lay still. "Let me go!" he cried, tears glimmering on his cheeks like light on silver fish scales. "Let me go! I can't stand being trapped! For two hundred years I've been trapped in the lake. This is worse. Unbind me!"

Mama coiled the excess line around her hand and gave it a stubborn tug. "You pitiful wretch," she said. The anger had gone out of her voice. She knew she had won. "When Karithe is herself again, then I'll set you free." She looked up. "Get down here, Karithe."

I stopped circling and landed in the grass by the ashes of the cookfire.

"Do it now," Mama told the Kamathian, giving a little shake on the line.

The spirit looked at me. Those round, unblinking eyes locked with mine, and the tears that filled them seemed to swirl like an ocean tempest for a moment. I cried out with dizziness. But it was not the cry of a loon. It was my own voice! "Mother!" I screamed as I sank wearily to the ground, my senses still spinning.

But she did not run to me and throw her arms about my shoulders or make any move to help me. She jerked sharply on the line again. "The rest of it, Kamathian," she snapped. "I'm no fool!"

My stomach churned suddenly, and I clutched my abdomen. A convulsion seized me. My mouth opened and I gasped at unexpected pain. A second seizure. Unable to rise, I leaned forward, bracing myself on my hands, and vomited up every piece of the fish I had eaten the day before.

With a cry of joy, Mama let go the line and ran to my side. "Karithe!" she exclaimed, slipping her thin old arms around my waist to steady me. "Karithe!"

The Kamathian wasted no time. He scrambled free of the shawl and leaped to his feet. He would not leave the garment, though. In a silver flash, he flung it about his shoulders and dived into the lake.

"You're free now, daughter," Mama crooned in my ear. "He can't hurt you any more. It's over."

I rose shakily, balancing on her, staring out over the lake. Far out on the water, a fish leaped high into the sunlight, its scales gleaming splendidly with all the colors of the rainbow.

Mama helped me back to the cottage and fed me hot tea and dry crackers until I got my strength back. Then she

washed and scrubbed my hair ten times — it seemed I'd inherited a colony of lice from the other loons. Later, she settled into her chair again and picked up her knitting. It was as if nothing unusual had transpired at all. She just resumed her work. Softly, she hummed to herself as she began a new piece. We had a trip to the village in a few days, and an income to earn.

Me, I went to the door, leaned there and stared past the hills toward Tabletop Mountain and the lake. Evening was drawing in, and the air was hushed with a quiet solemnity. I thought of the legend of Charlathe.

"I almost feel sorry for the spirits," I murmured quietly, rubbing my hands down my arms to settle the goosebumps. "They weren't truly evil. Just soldiers following orders."

"Charlathe was full of rage," Mama answered with a gentle sigh that bespoke her weariness. "With Ibis dead, she blamed them all." She shook her head as the needles clacked in her hands. "A mother's heart knows no reason when a child is involved."

I looked at her as the last umber glow of sunset seeped through the window and bathed her face and hair. I loved her, my mother. Yet how little I knew her, it seemed. How little I knew of her life. She had always been there, a focus, something for *me* to revolve around. A child doesn't question a parent, after all. A child just accepts.

"How did you know your net would hold the Kamathian?" I asked, taking a first small step toward adulthood.

"It had my blood on it," Mother answered simply, as if that was the entirety of the issue. Perhaps it was.

I stared back toward the lake. A few distant loons circled above the hills. The shadows of night drew a black pall over the water and crept up the hills, slowly devouring the bees and the grasshoppers, the moonpoints and the spiderwort.

"Mother," I asked again, breaking the silence. It surprised me. Her needles rested on her lap. They had been still for some time, and I hadn't noticed. She sat there calmly, watching me. "How did you know the valley was bare of trees before Charlathe made the lake? You told the spirit that."

"You ask a lot of questions, my pretty bird," she answered with a wistful smile. "Come sit by me, and we'll have a talk."

Later that night, when the moon was full and high above the rim of the mountains, we walked once more hand in hand down to the lake. The moon-dappled water sparkled, and the reeds swayed to and fro in the breeze, setting up a susurrus. Somewhere close by, a loon cried. We had talked for hours, letting the candles burn away. The soldiers had suffered enough, Mother had decided, and her grief was finally spent.

Her fingers tightened in mine before she let go. At the very edge of the lake,

Artwork by James Balkovek

she wept a few last tears in memory of the brother I had never known. Then she bent down by the shore and touched her hand to the dark-mirrored surface, palm meeting reflected palm, and in an act of forgiveness, she set the spirits free.

❄

Robin Wayne Bailey is the author of eleven novels, most recently **SHADOWDANCE** from Borealis Books and the highly successful **BROTHERS OF THE DRAGON** series from Roc Books. His short fiction has appeared in numerous **THIEVES WORLD** volumes as well as several of **MZB's SWORD AND SORCERESS** anthologies, among other venues. He's currently at work on a trio of novels featuring Fritz Leiber's famous characters, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser; the first of these, **SWORDS AGAINST THE SHADOWLAND**, will appear in June 1997 from Borealis.

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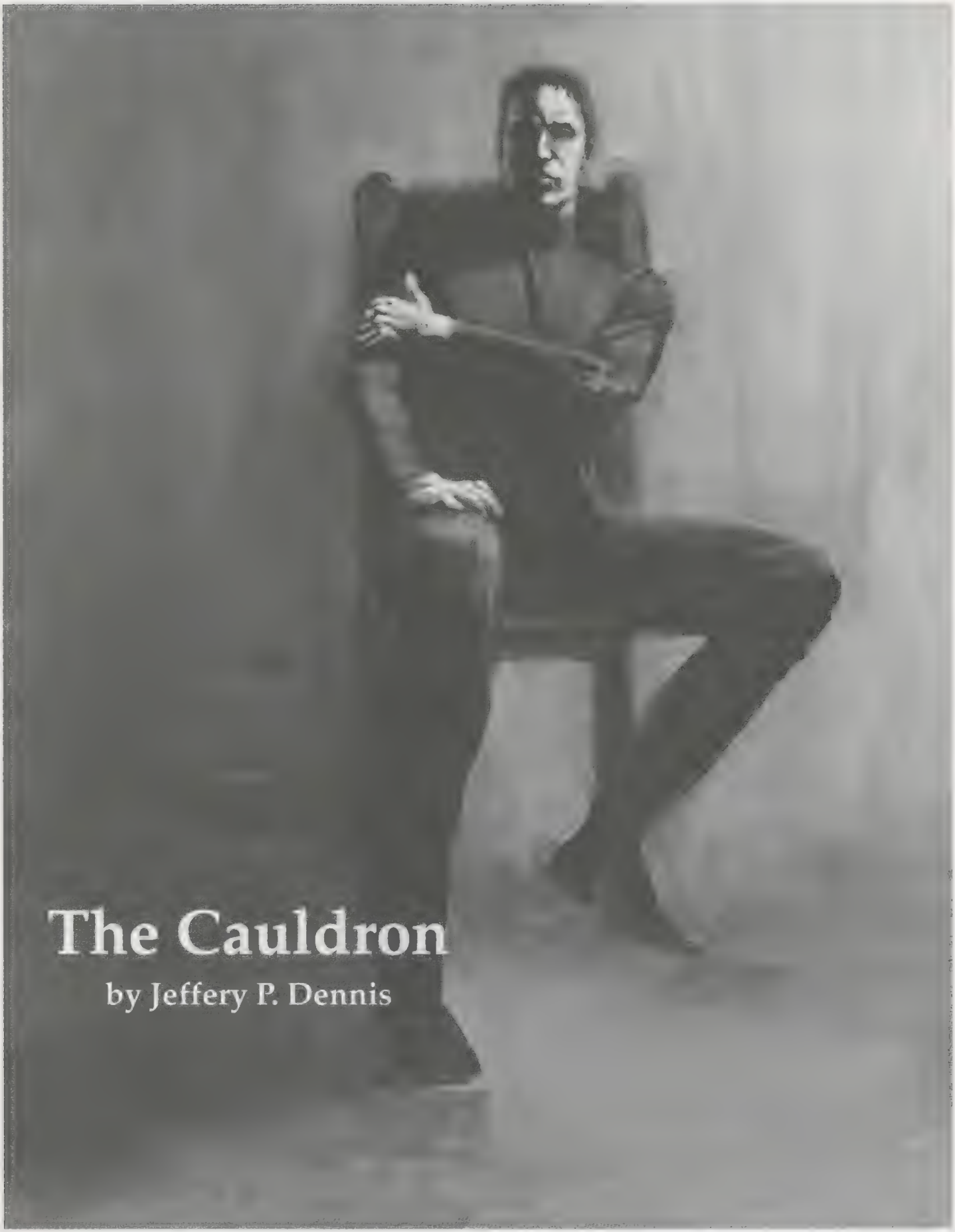

The Cauldron

by Jeffery P. Dennis

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

Rand no longer even thought about escaping from the castle — hours and days wandering about unchallenged had revealed no external doors, no windows, no skylights, just chambers that opened to other chambers, and arching hallways that abutted blank walls. The servants who cooked his meals and washed his clothes were deaf to both pleas and threats — they would never even speak. During all of his weeks, months, years in the castle, Rand heard the voices of only two other human beings, Esteiho and the Master.

Esteiho was a dark curly-haired boy of about twenty who gave the impression that he had jumped from a fishing boat. He spoke with a mild, comforting accent, and though his appreciation of philosophy and poetry lacked somewhat, he was always eager to postpone his duties (whatever they might be) for a game of chess or a chat. Smiling and friendly, perhaps even a bit lonely, he seemed a confidant and a companion — until Rand asked him about his life before he came to the castle.

"The past does not exist!" he exclaimed. "It is a fairy tale, like God, or ghosts. Why should I have to think about it?"

"But... most people enjoy talking about their homes and families," Rand said, shrinking back.

"Not me. And not you, either, if you know what's good for you." He stomped angrily from the room.

Rand ached to talk about his past: the stone village where he grew up, the wheat fields that stretched out to the horizon, the University where he read sonnets in a green-draped study, the City with its lights and bustle. He particularly wanted — needed — to discuss how he came to the castle. His last memory before — but there was no *last* memory, just a blur of squat square houses and dry trees and a face in the mirror that aged very gradually, and then — endless days in the castle, none that could be identified as the first. Esteiho might know, but Rand couldn't bring himself to ask. Something dark and horrible inside whispered that to even suspect the truth would mean moaning in a cool place forever.

Besides, his daily routine was not unpleasant. He ate regular, well-cooked meals, slept beneath clean linen sheets, and wandered unhindered through dozens of halls with gaudy parquet ceilings and sitting rooms with stone hearths carved into the images of gods and cherubs. He spent most of his time in the well-stocked library, devouring thick tomes of history and philosophy and biography, ancient grimoires, and tales of the battles of gods and demons.

Once every waking period (he hesitated to call them days), Esteiho led Rand down six staircases to a dim, iron-grey chamber lit by candles in greasy pools. There, on a tall straight-backed chair embossed with green lions, the Master waited. He appeared human, but impossibly tall, taller than the giants who lived before the Flood. He wore a dark, tight-fitting garment that exposed only his slender hands and slender beardless face. His skin was white, almost translucent, as if no blood flowed beneath. His features were stark, well-defined — chiseled straight cheekbones and a high flat forehead. His hair was short and black, his eyes corpse-white pools.

No matter how many times Rand approached the Master, he always had to fight down the urge to run. Fear throbbed in his chest, made his legs tremble and his gorge rise. Esteiho supported — pushed? — him with a strong hand against his shoulder, and once he whispered, "I'm afraid, too."

"Speak to me," the Master said. His voice was too deep to be human, very loud, yet there was a kind of restfulness in it. "Tell me what you have learned of the world."

Then Rand spoke of flame-eyed prophets and cities crumbling beneath red sand and barges poled slowly down mystic rivers. He spoke of the bright sun at dawn in the mountains, moonlight on the cobblestones, cannibals with blue-painted skulls, rain forests, murderers, whirling galaxies, pearls worth a king's ransom, witches, seashells, and death. He spoke until he was sweat-soaked and hoarse, until he no longer knew what he was saying, until there was nothing in the universe but words and words and words. Then, abruptly, the Master dismissed him, and Esteiho led him trembling to bed.

It was always the same: the dimly-lit room, the throbbing fear, the Master silent and staring. Rand recounted sixteen creation myths and twelve apocalypses. He recited prayers and nursery rhymes and fairy tales. He detailed each of his six love affairs. He described a number of dreams.

Then one day the Master said suddenly, "Enough."

It was such a departure from habit for the Master to speak at all, and such an odd question, that Rand could only stare.

"It is a strange world you inhabit, Rand, and a cluttered one. You are ready."

Rand felt Esteiho stiffen behind him. His hand crept from Rand's back to his waist in a curious half-hug. "Are you sure about this, sir?" he said.

The Master directed his gaze at Esteiho for a moment. Rand felt a spasm of relief, as if a fire in his soul had been suddenly extinguished. Then the gaze returned to him. "In the deepest chamber of this castle, you will find a cauldron." He spoke as nonchalantly as a teacher delivering an elementary lecture. "You need not concern yourself with its origin and function. Know only that it is the most evil artifact ever constructed by human or god, and it must be destroyed."

"How can it be destroyed?" Esteiho asked.

The Master stood, slowly, as if he were very old and very tired. "If you only knew how many lifetimes I spent when the world was young, searching for the answer to that question! I knew that the cauldron could break apart as easily as an eggshell and cease to be, if a human being leaps willingly into it."

"Any human being?"

A ritual question, Rand thought. It had been asked many times before, by Esteiho and his predecessors.

"No. Only one who was never born."

"One who was never born," Esteiho repeated, his eyes bright with longing.

Rand gasped in dull panic. "And I..."

The Master nodded, sadly, as a wise man might observe the innocence of a child. "Did you think I keep you here out of affection, like a giant might snatch up a fairy tale princess?" He laughed, a terrible rumbling sound. "You are a new creation, born not of man and woman but of my own artifice."

A creation. He means a monster! Rand felt the floor swaying, the dim light growing yellow; Esteiho wrapped both arms beneath his shoulders to keep him from falling. "But it can't be true. I remember my mother. I had a childhood!"

"So that you could be human in every respect, I endowed you with memories — but they are false, shadows. You have never been outside the castle."

"I... don't believe you," Rand said

weakly. The room grew grey and misty. He remembered the University, the smell of honeysuckle on the commons, discussions of fate and the gods on a hard stone bench. His mother, conjuring stories of talking bears at his bedside. One grandmother lived nearby, in a white house with geese honking in the front yard. A grandfather lived on a farm in the distant mountains. They visited summers. But all of it was a lie.

"I think you always knew," Esteiho whispered softly in his ear.

"I don't know now!" Rand tore away from Esteiho and ran from the room, up the six flights of stairs to the library. He swung dizzily to the nearest bookcase and tore the books from their shelves as if he were excising a cancer. Tales of saints and heroes, the loves of gods and mortals, ruminations on the world after death — they were all lies. His shirt was damp with sweat. His head throbbed, and he couldn't think clearly. He wanted to pray, but gods listened only to humans, to souls — not to monsters.

The air was thick and hot. Rand went to his room, splashed cold water on his face, and lay on his bed for a long time. Then he rose and walked silently through the castle. He walked for ages, his footfalls hard and loud in the silence, until it seemed that he had always walked thus. He turned down a corridor he had never seen before; the floor was marble, inlaid with bright rubies and alexandrite, and the squat doors were marked in no language he

Artwork by Armand Cabrera

knew.

He walked as if in a dream to a balustrade of gleaming metal, and descended into a vague coppery light.

"This is the place." His voice sounded somehow distorted, as if he were speaking across the gulf of worlds. A yellow mist clouded his eyes, and the sound of his footsteps echoed inside his head.

He came to a hall so huge that its ceiling was lost in a white mist. The walls were formed of a strange stone that glowed softly. Before him was a huge raised pool formed of living beings — dozens of men and women, writhing, jerking, shouting mutely with eyes from which the last humanity had been drained ages ago. Their bodies were grotesquely distended into the curve of a cauldron, and bound together by thin glittering serpents that hissed venom onto the marble floor. The boiling brew seared their bare backs and shoulders and buttocks.

Shaking with nausea and disgust, Rand mounted a stairway of gleaming copper and stepped out onto a ledge formed of taunt, grunting human bodies. A chthonic ocean boiled and seethed below. It was perfectly clear, the color of birth, of the sun shining through morning clouds, of trees budding on the first day of spring, boiling but not hot. It had no odor. Its sound, strangely, made Rand homesick: a vigorous, cheery bubbling, like a pot of soup on the stove.

"No more waiting," Rand shouted, as loud as he could to bolster his strength.

"Rand!" It was a young voice, from far off in the past, eager, gleeful. He turned slowly. Esteiho was rushing up the stairway.

"What are you doing here?" Rand asked angrily. He didn't want any distractions now.

"He lied to you!" Esteiho cried, hugging Rand to his bony chest.

Rand broke away. "You mean I'm not soulless? Not a monster?"

"You are certainly unborn. But the Master made you too well. I began to like you, and to look forward to our time together." He grinned shyly. "We became friends."

"That is irrelevant. How, exactly, did the Master lie?"

"The cauldron is not evil," Esteiho said in a breathless tone, as if he were struggling to condense a world's worth of speech into a few sentences. "No more than the sun and the stars. It is necessary."

"It tortures hundreds of human beings!" Rand exclaimed. Heaving and confused, he leaned out over the bubbling brew. He wanted more than anything to leap in, to forget, to drown.

"The Master has deceived you. It is formed of dead steel, not flesh."

"I am not the one who deceives you, Rand." Now the Master stood beside Esteiho, as close as a shadow.

"You are the Master of Confusion!" he cried, wrapping his arms around Rand to protect him — or to be protected.

"My protégé is regrettably too weak for this great work. When one of his pets must suffer a bit of discomfort, he wilts like dry grass in summer."

Esteiho began to whimper like a frightened child.

"You must jump now." The Master's eyes were dark, hypnotic. "Why else were you created?"

Warm brew was splashing at Rand's feet, and all around him the living beings were crying and moaning. He had never felt so tired, so weak. He tried to break free, but Esteiho hugged him so tightly that they were both in danger of falling.

"If I jump now, I'll take Esteiho with me."

The Master threw up his hands in exasperation. "Of what importance is that? He is mortal, destined to die anyway."

"Esteiho is my only friend in the castle," Rand said in disbelief. The boy was trembling. "I can't send him to his death!"

"I can send you to a thousand deaths," the Master said in a low, even voice. "Each more painful than the last. You must decide."

Rand looked down at Esteiho, the shadow.

He was smiling.

A smile before eternity.

Rand began to laugh. Now he understood... The castle was a spider's lair, sharp black rock and dirt, with a glittering web overhead. And the Master was the spinning spider. With a frantic shout, he slammed against the Master's cold, grey iron body. The Master roared like a trapped lion, spun about and distended his body in a frantic attempt to regain his footing, but he fell into the sizzling brew. He thrashed for only a moment. Then he was a grey, iron mass, formless as chaos. And then he was nothing.

Esteiho was sobbing quietly. Rand led him shakily down the copper stairway, past stylized iron figures. They no longer seemed alive.

"So the Master was human," Rand said.

"Human, but immortal. He may be entering a new womb at this moment." Esteiho looked behind him, at the smoking cauldron, and shuddered.

"As a tiny baby? He'll be harmless."

"But in twenty or thirty years he'll be a man. Then he'll come back. We must be far away by then, with new names and new lives." His tears gave way to a wistful smile. "I wanted to be a physician once..."

The floodgates opened, and dreams and plans for both of them flew from the boy's mind in a rich, varied procession. Rand listened patiently as they trudged through the vaults of trembling iron, but then he said, "I've decided to stay."

Esteiho gasped. "But don't you want to go outside, to see the sun, and trees, and other people?"

"Of course. But I'll continue to live here in the castle, to study all of the Master's books. And twenty or thirty years from now, when he appears for a new confrontation, I'll be ready."

The boy was silent for a long time. He swallowed hard, and hugged Rand tightly with both arms. "Then I'll be ready, too."

❄

Jeffery P. Dennis has a master's degree in creative writing and a Ph.D. in comparative literature, but his primary interests have always been anthropology, linguistics, and folklore. He wrote his first (unpublished) science fiction novel when he was fifteen, and since then his work has appeared in *Dharma, Eternity, Freeway, Midstream, Noah's Ark, On the Line, Quark*, and elsewhere. Two more science fiction novels are waiting in his files for their big break.

Armand Cabrera is a self-taught artist and says, "I've been at it for a million years" — really since 1980. He worked for several years in the computer game field, at Lucasfilm on their *STAR WARS* games and at Electronic Arts as a computer artist. Cabrera lives in northern California.

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Ballot for this issue on p. 64

Neko's Dance

by Carol E. Leever

Neko knelt on the hard stone floor of the temple, head bowed, dark hair falling about her face as she pretended to pray. The altar before her glowed with a thousand candles, tiny jade statues beside each flickering light. Along the walls stood enormous twisted guardian statues of large-eyed creatures with

wings, claws and shining horns. Bright gems glittered from their eyes, gold coated their stone bodies. Eight million gods in the land, and this temple laid claim to one thousand of them, a jade statue for each. But Neko knew that only thirty of them really counted — the thirty that lazed about her in various poses of contentment. Thirty great golden cats watched her through gleaming eyes. They sprawled upon the stone floor, draped themselves across the altar steps or the guardians' feet. Three had even dared to curl up contentedly on the altar itself, flicking their tails defiantly at the burning candles. It was one of those Neko was watching.

The furry cat stretched in his sleep, arching his back as he shifted precariously toward the edge of the altar. One stretch too many, an inch too far, and he rolled off the edge. He woke in midfall, whipping his body around to catch himself so that he landed on his feet with the grace cats were famous for — barring his initial clumsiness.

Neko burst into laughter, fueled all the more by the cat's indignant look and scolding cry. Rising to her feet, Neko scooped up the ruffled cat and cuddled him, sinking down onto the altar steps.

"Poor baby," she crooned, still giggling. She stroked his long golden fur, marveling at the silky texture. "Did the nasty ground wake you?"

The cat meowed in pouting agreement as Neko scratched his ears. Twenty-nine other pairs of eyes watched them both in amusement. They seemed to like Neko's laughter. All began purring.

Neko felt the cat stiffen suddenly in her arms, and she frowned, looking at the others. All had stirred and were gazing attentively at the temple door, ears perked, whiskers bristling as they sniffed the air.

Neko gazed at the ornate gold-gilded door, wondering if the monks were coming to feed the cats. Save for feeding times they never disturbed the

Artwork by Alicia Austin

thirty temple residents — or Neko for that matter. Long ago the monks had seen the way the cats welcomed Neko, wrapping around her legs when she walked, purring when she played with them. The monks left Neko strictly alone — if the cats trusted her, who were they to defy them?

She listened carefully, hearing a soft footfall upon the stone steps beyond the open door. She sniffed the air, separating out the scents of cherry blossoms and flowers from the gardens surrounding the old temple. Mingled with the floral perfume was a faint spicy scent drifting in on the breeze that Neko had learned to associate with her father. She stood in surprise, wondering what she had done to warrant a visit from him, Hiromatsu, lord of the land. She had come to the temple to practice her kata and hoped her father wouldn't realize she'd been playing with the cats instead.

She waited pensively as her father entered the temple, his face grim and hard, long black hair braided down his back. She bowed respectfully as was their custom. He returned the greeting stiffly, then approached her.

"Tomorrow is your naming day, Neko," he announced, his voice loud. The cats flicked their delicate golden ears in annoyance. "You must declare your adult name and your future intentions."

She smiled hesitantly. "Yes, Father."

Hiromatsu stiffened, raising a hand for silence. "No!" he snapped harshly, startling her. "You will never again call me Father. I have not for one moment believed you to be my daughter!"

Neko's face paled, her body growing cold with shock. "What do you mean?" she whispered, horrified.

Hiromatsu sneered in disgust. "Have you never looked in a mirror, Neko?"

She raised a hand to her face, knowing immediately what he meant. Her hair was black like that of all her people, but little else about her conformed. Her skin was sun-touched gold, not the porcelain white of her mother's or the soft yellow of her father's. She was too tall, already towering over most of her older brothers, nearly as tall as Hiromatsu himself. But mostly it was her eyes that marked her. They were not the deep black they should be, but rather jade green. When the light caught within them, they shone like jewels. They slanted as her father's did, but too much so, more like animal eyes, large and alien in her child's face.

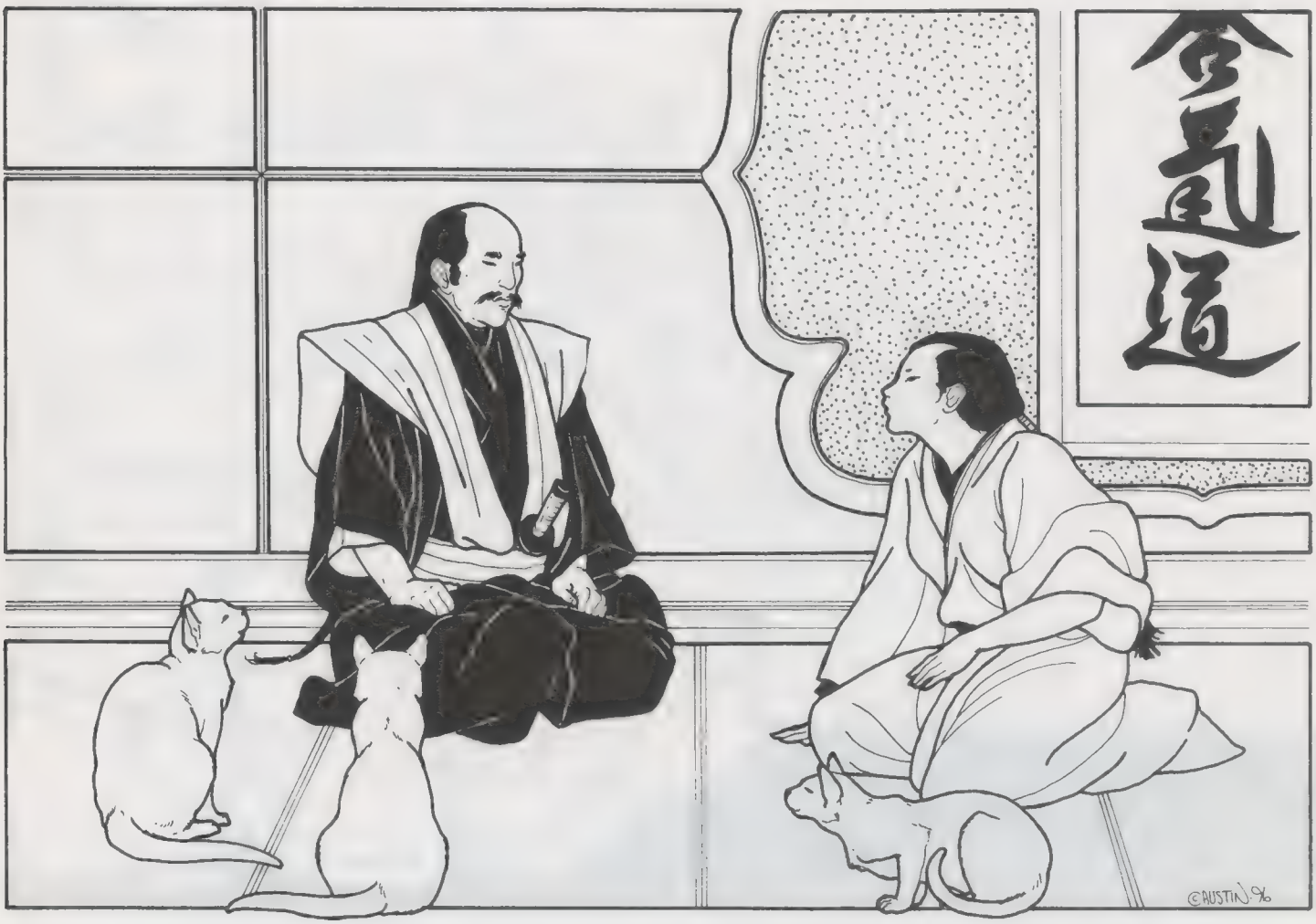
"I have no green-eyed daughters," Hiromatsu said coldly. "For thirteen years I have endured this dishonor for the sake of an oath I swore to your mother's father. Tomorrow when you reach the age of adulthood I am free of my oath to protect your mother and all her children."

"What will you do?" Neko asked, trembling.

"Your mother has given me six sons. For that I give her freedom. She will go back to her father's house and dishonor me no more."

"And me?" Neko asked. "What will happen to me?"

Hiromatsu studied her closely, his eyes cold. "Tomorrow when you declare your intentions, you have three choices. The first — you may swear an



Artwork by Alicia Austin

Artwork by Alicia Austin

oath of loyalty and become a servant in my house. You will live in the servants' quarters and do the work of a washerwoman."

Washerwoman! Neko stared at him in horror. "But I want to be a samurai! I have trained all my life for that!" She had never conceived of doing anything else — and her calling had seemed so clear. Though many years their junior, she had bested all her brothers in combat. She was faster than all of them, a natural acrobat. Movement and fighting came easily to her, precision and skill inborn. She could glide through a kata more gracefully than her swordmasters. To have all that go to waste — to be a washerwoman — seemed the cruelest of torments.

Hiromatsu laughed at her. "You will never be a samurai! Few women ever obtain such an honor — and without a clan or family name to call your own, you never shall."

Neko felt stunned, as if he'd dealt her a blow. This couldn't be happening!

"I will, however, grant you a chance to redeem some honor for yourself if you have the courage," Hiromatsu continued, his expression softening fractionally. Neko waited in silence. "Your second option — if you choose the Celestial Road, I will allow it. If you have the courage you may take your own life, and do so with honor."

Ritual suicide. Neko shivered. Three times in her life she'd seen one of her father's samurai take the Celestial Road with great ceremony, grim pride, and the approval of his brethren. Three times she'd watched men die by their own hands, and three times she'd grown ill and heartsick. She understood the demands of honor, understood the spiritual significance of such an act, but her heart could find no joy in death, no reason to rejoice for the dead men's redemption. To her it was the greatest sorrow — it could never be anything else.

"You said I had three options," she said numbly, gazing blindly at the ground.

Hiromatsu drew himself up. "The third option is banishment. If you do not choose one of the others, I will cast you out of my home for good. You will starve in the woods like an animal. The choice is yours, Neko. I trust you will conduct yourself with dignity." With that, he turned and strode away, leaving Neko alone and trembling.

Tears welled in her eyes as her thirteen years seemed to drop away from her until she was a small child again. "Oh, Mama," she whispered. "Mama will help me." She ran from the temple, down the great stone steps, and headed home, toward her mother's chambers.

Behind her, thirty silent gold cats came out of the temple. They stood upon the warm stone steps watching Neko run through the flower-filled garden as the setting sun gleamed brightly in their slanted eyes.

Neko slipped off her shoes and straightened her long silken tunic before entering the house. Then she dashed to her mother's chambers, kneeling quickly before the silk door.

She slid it silently open, trying to quell her tears. Silence greeted her, and she blinked in startled surprise at the sight before her.

Her mother, Karimitsu, fairest daughter of War Lord Kashimodo, knelt before a small wooden altar. Her maids, with their white faces and large painted eyes, knelt all around her, unmoving and silent. Upon the altar was a razor-sharp tanto — a knife purified and cleansed.

"Mama, no!" Neko cried out, rising and running to her mother's side. She fell beside her on the mat Karimitsu knelt upon, taking her mother's cold hands in her own.

Karimitsu smiled. "Oh, Neko," she said softly. "You should not be here. I know how you feel about the Celestial Road."

"Then it's true," Neko whispered, knowing there could be no other reason for her mother to take her life. "I am not Hiromatsu's daughter?"

Karimitsu shook her head. "No, Neko. You are not."

"Then who is my father?"

Karimitsu gently touched Neko's hair. "I do not know, child," she admitted, and touched Neko's lips to silence her when she would have protested. "Nor do I know who your mother is," she continued.

Neko's eyes widened. "I don't understand — you are my mother."

But Karimitsu shook her head in denial. "Thirteen years ago, my daughter died at birth. My maid took her small body into the woods to bury her, and when she returned she discovered you in the crib. I wanted a daughter so badly that I swore my maid to secrecy and named you my own."

Neko felt her world crumbling around her — to learn that she was not whom she'd believed herself to be all her life. It was numbing. "Then who am I?"

Karimitsu smiled. "I suppose you are the child of one of the spirit folk. The Kami are strong in the woods surrounding this house. One of them must have left you for me."

"But then there is no reason for you to do this!" Neko cried, glancing quickly at the knife. "Don't you see? You have not dishonored Hiromatsu at all. You do not need to die!"

But Karimitsu shook her head. "He will never believe my story, Neko. And I will not dishonor my family by returning home disgraced. I must do this."

Neko shook her head in denial, tears in her eyes. Karimitsu hugged her quickly.

"Tomorrow you stand before Hiromatsu and all his samurai. Name yourself well, Neko. If you cannot follow me on the Celestial Road, then defy them with your name. And know that in Heaven I will watch over you and approve."

"Mama," Neko whispered, but Karimitsu had turned away, eyes once again on the knife.

"Go away now, Neko," she ordered. "I do not want you to witness this."

As she reached out her pale hand toward the knife, Neko choked back a sob and fled from the chambers. She raced from the house, through the gardens, heading deep into the darkening woods. Sorrow closed in around her heart, the deepest sorrow of loss and loneliness.

Blinded by salty tears, she did not see the cherry blossoms floating through the air like snowflakes, or see that the rising moon set them alight like fireflies. She forgot the stories of the magic in the woods at night, or that creatures strange and wondrous prowled the darkness. She did not notice that the temple steps were empty.

Neko wandered for hours through the woods, lost and alone among the dogwood and maple. Blossoming cherry and plum trees scented the air, tall willowy pine mixed among the alder. A full moon hung like a lamp in the sky, brightening the night so that she was not frightened. But she was tired and heartsick.

Slowly she sank down on the blossom-strewn ground, wishing she was home with her mother — but of course that would never happen again. Karimitsu was gone.

A sound drifted through the night, strange and soft, like a dream. Neko raised her head. She heard wind chimes, and mixed among their crystalline notes were the deep haunting voices of flutes.

Neko frowned, growing still and silent. There were drums amid the darkness, accompanying the chimes and flutes — music beautiful and compelling coming from the woods. She listened with growing wonder, her heart beginning to pound.

The woods at night — the stories, the legends, the Kami! She was alone in the woods, a full moon gazing down on her, music filling the air. She felt the first stirring of fear.

From between two cherry trees she saw the first of the Kami emerge — a procession slow and dignified. They were people, Neko realized in silent wonder, with the bodies of men and women — but their faces! She stared wide-eyed at them.

Aglow in the moonlight, they walked slowly past her, their gowns and robes made of shining white-and-red silk. The dragons came first, seeming more to slide and float rather than walk, their large eyes like giant multifaceted jewels, long trailing whiskers hanging from their cheeks like those of bearded old men.

Behind the dragons came the cranes, white as virgin snow. They took large, careful steps, setting one foot down ever so gently before lifting the other. They moved their silk-clad arms in a silent dance of wings and wind, pale white feathers mingling with their long flowing hair.

Then came the foxes, regal yet mischievous, dark eyes gleaming from fur-covered faces. Their tall pointed ears caught the sounds of the woods with each twitch, long noses scented the breeze. And though they too had the bodies of men and women, Neko was amazed to see long fluffy tails poking out from beneath their shimmering robes.

There were dogs behind the foxes, and monkeys and hares and sparrows. Last of all came the cats. Thirty beautiful, graceful creatures in white and red. Their cat-faces were golden, their eyes slanted and alien. They carried blossoming cherry branches in their arms, and their golden tails swayed with the drum beat.

Staring in wonder, Neko did not realize that the procession had stopped until one of the cats broke away from the group and came toward her. The cat's eyes were green, like flecks of jade. She reached out her hand to Neko, helping the girl to her feet.

"Come, little feline," the cat laughed, her voice like a gentle breeze. "Tomorrow is your naming day. But tonight you shall learn who you are."

She led Neko back to the line, making room beside her so that Neko too could walk in the silent procession. As if in a dream, Neko joined the rhythm of the march, letting the music overwhelm her, imagining that she too glowed like moonlight, and that her

Artwork by Alicia Austin

laughter sounded like a gentle breeze.

They marched silently and elegantly to a clearing in the woods where the cats laid their cherry branches down. The dragons breathed deeply onto the tender blossoms which burst into flame. The music grew louder, the drumbeat more insistent, more intoxicating.

"Tonight you must learn how to dance, little feline," the green-eyed cat told her. "Tonight you must learn what happiness is."

Neko stared at her in wonder, thinking her truly the most noble and regal of all creatures. "Have you a name?" she asked, her mind keen on her own naming day. Karimitsu had told her to defy Hiromatsu with her name.

The cat smiled, whiskers splaying across her face. Mischief flared in her eyes, hilarity in the way she flicked her tail.

"I am called Cat-Who-Swats-Birds!" And with that she reached out with lightning reflexes and slapped one of the shimmering cranes with her hand. The crane fluttered away in indignation as the cat suddenly spun away from Neko and joined in the dance that was beginning around the fire.

Neko stared after her in stunned shock. The cats were spinning and turning, the dogs leaping, the cranes fluttering around the prancing foxes. All the creatures where dancing, moving to the music and the moonlight and the wind. Neko called to them as they passed, asking for their names. She found that all of them titled themselves in silliness, in humor, in truth. No noble, no regal, no dignified names in the bunch.

The green-eyed cat returned, taking Neko's hand and pulling her into the dance. Neko gave herself up to the music, mimicking all of them as best she could. She found in time that it was kata she was performing, but not kata of technique or form, but rather of nature and music. She moved like the wind, flowed with grace and harmony among the raining blossoms, danced freely within the flickering firelight. The scents of cherry and pine overwhelmed her, the night closing in around her like a mother's caress. Time and sorrow were forgotten.

Neko awoke on the soft futon in her room. She was still dressed in her tunic from yesterday, her feet bare and dirty with forest earth. She heard the chimes in the temple sounding, knew it must be late in the morning. She was being summoned, late to her own naming ceremony.

Laughing in amusement she leaped up and raced from her room, not bothering to even comb her tangled hair as she headed toward the temple.

The cats were waiting for her on the steps, watching her with curious eyes as she approached the gilded door.

"Thank you," she said to them, not caring who heard her. She knew Hiromatsu, his sons, and his samurai were waiting inside for her. "I know what to name myself now," she told the cats. "And I know what my intentions must be."

She pushed open the door. The people inside were praying before the altar, all kneeling in dignified repose. The monks were still tending the candles,

strong incense spicing the air. Hiromatsu, kneeling at the front, turned, spying Neko in the doorway. He rose to his feet, standing before the assembly. He motioned Neko forward. All eyes turned toward him.

"Today is Neko's naming day," he announced to the samurai. Neko saw her brothers rise to stand beside their father, their eyes grim and pensive. They all wore their katanas proudly at their sides, hands resting lightly on the hilts. Samurai, every one of them, like she would never now be.

She bowed to all of them, heedless of her wild, unkempt appearance. Hiromatsu returned the bow, as did her brothers. The samurai, fifty in all, watched from their kneeling positions on the floor.

"State here before all of us the name you take in your adult life, and your intentions for the future," Hiromatsu commanded.

Neko drew herself up, smiling. "I name myself Cat-Dancing," she announced, not caring that Hiromatsu and his sons stared at her in wide-eyed shock. "And my intentions are to be happy."

Hiromatsu's face turned red with fury. "You make a mockery of this proceeding! And after I had agreed to honor you! Henceforth I banish you from my house — you will live without clan, family, or home till your dying day."

Too late the monks reacted, pressing forward with looks of horror on their faces. "My lord, no!" they cried. "Do not send her away."

Cat-Dancing was already turning, heading toward the door. She laughed in amusement at the sound of the wind outside.

"My lord!," the monks cried. "She will take the Kami with her. She is your happiness. She will leave all her sorrow behind — here in your home!"

"Do not speak such nonsense!" Hiromatsu yelled.

"You must listen!" the monks cried. "Stop her!" they yelled to the samurai.

The warriors reacted swiftly, rising to catch her. But she danced past all of them, moving easily and gracefully through their tangled mix, brushing off their grasping hands, tripping them and turning them till they were tangled amongst each other. Not a single one could catch her despite all their training and skill at arms. Cat-Dancing disappeared through the temple door.

She kept walking, never looking back as she headed deep into the woods. Beside her walked thirty golden cats, eyes gleaming like jewels. They left the temple alone and bereft, filled with angry men and a child's sorrow.

❄

Carol E. Leever discovered the world of sf/fantasy in the second grade and has been creating her own worlds ever since. Born in Albany, New York, she has lived all her life in California where she received an MA in English from California State University of Sacramento.

Alicia Austin's work is loved by sf and fantasy fans. She and her business partner, Jinx Beers, run Fantasies Unlimited. Alicia has explored Western and Native American themes lately, but for this story returns to Asian settings for which she is equally famous.

Artwork by Alicia Austin

The Envelope Gremlin

by Huan-Hua Chye

The Writer pulled the last page of her story from the printer, stacked it neatly with the others, and went to search for stamps, a pen, and an envelope.

The Envelope Gremlin peered out from the dark little cave underneath The Writer's desk. (He lived there comfortably in a nest of dust bunnies and crumpled guideline sheets, which he collected from The Writer's desk at night. He lived, of course, on a diet of envelopes.) "Ah-ha!" said The Envelope Gremlin. "Now, while she is looking for her pen, I will spirit away the last of her 9x12's for dinner, and her box of business-size envelopes for midnight snacks." He crept out, carefully making sure nobody was looking, and grabbed the delicious gummed papers in his spindly paperclip arms. With some effort, he shoved the lot into his home, which was the one musty space under the desk where The Writer never seemed to look.

He heard The Writer banging around in the kitchen, muttering about her stamps. "I still have a while," said The Envelope Gremlin to himself, licking his lips. He jumped onto the desk again and grabbed all of The Writer's letter-sized envelopes, including the scented floral ones sent from her Aunt Maude at Christmas. It was quite an armful. He staggered down and crammed it into his pantry.

Turning, The Envelope Gremlin saw that he had dropped two scented floral envelopes next to the computer tower. He sprinted off to get them.

The Writer came back with her stamps (which had unfortunately been transported to the refrigerator by The Odd-Places Gremlin). "Dratitude!" she said. "All my envelopes are gone! I suppose I'll just have to send this off next week." (The Writer lived in a place called Suburbia, where she was effectively housebound, not owning a car; only The Envelope Gremlin's voracious appetite kept her going to the store on her skateboard each month.) "But what's this?" She bent to pick up the floral envelopes. The Envelope Gremlin cowered inside one of them (the worst bane of the Gremlins is being seen in their mischief). "I hope The Editor doesn't mind."

Artwork by Susan Alexander

The Writer addressed both envelopes and stamped them, slid her story inside one, folded the other, Gremlin and all, and stuck it inside the one addressed to The Editor. "Dear Editor, Sorry about the funny envelopes all the time, but my good ones keep getting spirited away, you wouldn't believe how ..." she jotted down on a notecard. Frowning — the envelope seemed suspiciously lumpy — The Writer dropped her story in the mailbox on the corner.

"Another one of these little flowered envelopes," groused The Editor. She didn't feel like unfolding the complex origami of The Writer's story, so she left the slitted envelope on her desk and pulled out another one.

It was a story about a college of lesbian priestesses with mental and emotional links to sapient purple rhinoceroses. "Brilliant! Moving! The issue is filled!" cried The Editor, and bounded downstairs to show the story to her secretary.

The Envelope Gremlin crawled out. SASEs from all over the country awaited him ...

"Now, for this story," The Editor said, unfolding all fifty-two creases. "Mmm ... this one's good too, but the issue's all filled up. `Inelastic Typeface'," she murmured, writing it down on the rejection slip. Folding the letter around the story, The Editor reached for some guidelines — she thought The Writer could use some tips on manuscript preparation, especially the cutoff point for using 9"x12" envelopes (four pages).

There were no guidelines.

"Oh, well," said The Editor. She looked around for The Writer's envelope.

There was no envelope.

There were no envelopes at all.

In his hidey-hole beneath The Editor's desk, The Envelope Gremlin, full and content, snoozed happily in a cushier pile of guidelines than he had ever had at The Writer's.

Across the nation, budding authors anxiously wondered what had become of their stories. (Their stories had, of course, been thrown away due to lack of SASEs.)

Two days later, The Writer, engaged in spring cleaning, discovered a mysterious cache of envelopes under her desk. Puzzled, she moved them back onto her desk, where they stayed. (For about three weeks, until they migrated to her sock drawer. The Odd-Places Gremlin was still around.)

❄

Huan-Hua Chye is a junior at Homestead High School in Sunnyvale, California. She has previously (despite the meddlings of her many resident gremlins) been published in the magazines *Cricket*, *Broken Cisterns*, *In Other Words*, and *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*.

Susan Alexander hails from Canada originally, and is married to artist Rob Alexander. She lives in Seattle and is currently on leave from Boeing to develop her art career.

The Other Gift

by Roger Martin

"Did you bring it?"

Hans Stegmen planted his elbows on the bed as he spoke, leaning forward with all the trembling strength he could muster, as if that fraction of a foot would help him clarify the vague form in the doorway.

Eric's hightops chirped on the glossy floor as he leaned across the threshold.

"Grandpa? You sure this is okay? Mom will ground me for a year if she finds out."

The old man dismissed the question with a shake of his head.

"Did you bring it?" he repeated.

Instead of answering, the boy surveyed the room, wrinkling his nose at the odor of phenol and fermented sweat.

"Well, did you or didn't you?"

Like a convict surrendering for prison, Eric sighed and stepped inside. He carried a brown case, which he put on the bed reluctantly.

The old man put a hand on the case and managed a few clumsy strokes, dislodging pebbly crumbs of dry rotted leather. He mumbled something to himself and smiled, and after a moment looked up.

"Take it out and let me see it."

Eric hesitated.

"Do it."

The latches were frozen, and he fumbled to get a finger under them. Finally they squeaked open, and slowly, almost reverently, Eric lifted the lid. Inside, a violin cocooned in velvet that had once been crimson. The lid cradled a bow. Eric lifted the instrument with both hands and brought it close for the old man's inspection.

So many years. All the important orchestras, all the major conductors. Concert halls filled to standing, upturned faces bright with anticipation. Hans Stegmen used his violin and his gift to fill the need in those faces. Night after night, until the neck wore the mark of his fingers and the finish mellowed to satin under his caress.

"Hans Stegmen doesn't play," wrote one reporter, "he blazes like a watch fire. His performances transcend the mechanics of instrument and hands and ears. Notes fly burning from his bow and bury themselves in the soul as if aimed by telepathy."

The reporter was righter than he knew, and he had penned his review when Hans was at the height of his powers. Hans had reveled in his gift, and thought it would give him the power to play forever.

Then came the first stroke.

Before long, there were others. Invisible like grave worms, they ate his talent in bits, crippling his legs and gnawing the life out of his wonderful hands.

Now he lay in a white room, and his music was dead. In its place was the peeping of the heart monitor, keeping time to the steady ebb of his life.

"Time is short," Hans said. "We must start before I'm too weak."

"I don't know, Grandpa. I've heard the folks talk, but can you really do it? I mean, you haven't tried in years. Don't you get bad headaches afterward?"

The old man shook his head impatiently, which unleashed a fit of coughing. Afterwards he labored to breathe the words.

"I can. Family is easier. You won't

hurt, I promise."

Eric stalled. Doubt stalked his eyes.

"Please," Hans whispered. "If you love me, do this thing!"

The boy sighed again, his eyes searching the room as if the walls might hide a witness. With dragging steps he went to the door and closed it.

"Okay," he said, but his voice quivered.

"Good. Rosin the bow and bring a chair. We must be close."

Under the old man's instruction, Eric prepared the bow. Then he placed the room's lone chair beside the bed. He sat, holding the violin awkwardly in his big hands.

"I feel stupid," he said.

"Hush. Think of a candle burning in a dark room. I will do the rest."

Old and young sat in silence. Only the monitor made a sound. Hans closed his eyes and let his chin droop to his chest.

Launching out was the worst part. Venturing into the dark vertigo that lay outside the self. The push was even harder than he remembered, but Hans endured in silence. Concentration carved furrows into his forehead and watered them with perspiration. The void surrounded him, horrible in its emptiness. A groan fled his lips, but he did not hear.

He wandered the black wasteland where there is no time. Finally he began to sense a light flickering in the abyss. He fought towards it. The terror receded as he neared the glow of another consciousness.

He moved closer, drawn by the wellspring of youth — firm muscles, clear eyes, but most of all the young, supple hands resting on the old violin. When he was very close, he raised those hands. The instrument nestled under Eric's chin. The boy's fingers stroked the strings and, together, they played.

Slowly at first. Scales and children's exercises. The fingers were strong, but unused to the discipline. They loosened as Hans bent them to his will.

Faster they played and faster, until the hands flew in a blur over the violin. The music surged like a swollen river, sweeping away intellect in a flood of experience. Hans and Eric surrendered to its ecstasy.

The music stormed the hall, capturing a crowd of white-clad hospital workers and gathering them at the door to listen in slack-jawed amazement at the playing of a seventeen-year-old boy. Still the music thundered on, crashing against itself and echoing back until the walls seemed to quiver from trying to hold the sound.

Suddenly, the violin shrieked and was silent. The monitor's peeping rose to a shrill scream.

The staff members fell out of their trance and staggered into jerky action. One swept the case onto the floor as the rest converged on the bed, squeezing Eric aside until he stood alone and ignored by the door.

They moved at a pace just short of frantic, looking quickly from the patient to one another and talking low and nonstop. The monitor howled for attention, and they tried to placate it by working on the old man.

Twenty minutes they labored, urged on by the monitor. Then, like a flywheel spinning down, the hands slowed. The looks got longer. Finally, a doctor shook his head. A nurse silenced the monitor in mid-wail. The silence lay heavy in their ears as, one by one, the people in white dispersed to look after the living.

Eric and the old man were alone again. The boy noticed his left hand throbbing and looked down to find the blood already starting to pool in his ravaged fingertips.

Artwork by Mark Poole

He shook his hand absently as he picked up the case and put it back on the bed. Then he laid the instrument and the bow to rest and closed the lid. The latches went back easily this time.

He restored the chair from where the nurse had shoved it aside. Then he sat and studied his grandfather a long time.

The old eyes were closed, the lines around them smooth and shallow. The mouth was tranquil, with the barest touch of upturn at the corners. The old man's hands were by his side, curved as if cradling his violin.

Eric sighed and shook his head. He was in real trouble now. After tonight, his mom would probably ground him for the rest of his life.

Then he smiled. Whatever happened was worth the cost.

He had felt the music, and now he understood why Grandpa risked everything to play one last time.

And in the last instant before the end, he felt something more. Like the music, but grander and more thrilling. It was a symphony turned to light, a chorus of ten million voices and the sound of many waters. It was beautiful, but more than that, it was good.

And whatever it was, Grandpa was part of it now.

He heard shuffling outside the door. The hospital workers were returning.

Eric picked up the case and stole away, his hightops chirping a duet as he walked the hall.

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Roger Martin: I've been freelance writing seven years. Most of my sales have been outdoor fiction, humor, and essays on writing. I think fiction, whatever its form, is a laboratory for the soul. As a reader and a writer, I want a story to move me emotionally and teach me something about our shared humanity. Writing science fiction has been an on again/off again pursuit for me. Lately, though, I've realized many of my stories are more suited to fantasy, thus this submission to MZB. In my other life I have B.S. and M.S. degrees in chemical engineering, and I spend most of my time planning and overseeing environmental cleanups. I'm 37 and live in Midland, Texas with my wife and sometime writing partner, Pam. We have one daughter, Meredith, and a house full of pets.

Mark Poole has a B.A. degree in fine arts from the University of SC. His early influences were Marvel Comics, sf, and fantasy novels. Three years ago, while living in isolation in Lexington, SC, he stumbled upon his very first convention. From that point on he has been very focussed and busy. He has won awards, been published, and produced several prints of his high fantasy work. He works primarily in acrylics. He has a wife of five years, and owns a small puff of a mutt named Gizmo. They still live in South Carolina. He and his wife recently celebrated the birth of their second child.

Artwork by Mark Poole

Letters

MZB HITS THE WEB
Janet Elliott, Jaffrey NH

I though you might find it interesting that I ran across a note on the Internet about your magazine. I became interested enough to pick up a copy (they are very hard to come by in rural New Hampshire). I enjoyed it very much. I don't normally read a magazine cover to cover.

Ruth Souther, Springfield IL

I would like to know if you do any correspondence through e-mail, for example, requests for guidelines and possibly submissions, or a website.

MZB does not do e-mail, but we have put the guidelines on our web site: ***http://www.well.com/user/mzbfm/*** *—REH*

AN EDITOR'S DILEMMA
E.R. Stewart, APO AE

As producers of a magazine, surely you know the high cost of paper; plus the time, ink, wear-and-tear on equipment, and other headaches associated with each and every issue. Waste must be kept to an absolute minimum, and costs too.

Writers, at least professionals, strive to produce clean, legible mss. They work hard at it, and gladly accept editing when it's done with an eye toward publication. In fact, I've praised your editing abilities in print.

In this light, can you not see that each *rejected* manuscript on which you place notations and comments is at once spoiled for further submissions? It must be reprinted, and that costs writers money, time, and effort that some can scarce afford.

Kevin Yaney, San Diego CA

Recently, I submitted a story to you. You rejected it. But you also gave me a line by line edit of the story. That was terribly nice of you! Thank you! I know you must have a mountainous pile of manuscripts begging for your attention and to show that much care in your review of them deserves notice. As a struggling writer, I can't afford flowers, but I hope this card will do.

You see my dilemma? The times have certainly changed since I first started writing — back when all manuscripts were laboriously typewritten and white-out seemed like a godsend. Those were the circumstances under which much of "editorial morality" developed. Writing (or spilling something) on a returned manuscipt was considered akin to vandalism, and there was a great deal more leeway given for last-minute hand-corrections and dog-ears. But, to my occasional dismay, the use of personal computers has changed that situation almost beyond recognition. I suppose it is possible that I still receive a hand-typewritten manuscript on occasion — I haven't noticed — but that would be an extreme exception. When I receive a word-processed manuscript, there is no excuse whatsoever for hand-corrections, white-out, formatting errors, and the like. Fixing and reprinting a page is a matter of seconds and pennies. And, more to the immediate point, printing off a new, clean copy of a short story for each submission costs about the same as the return postage for the manuscript would. No, printing isn't free, but even if you use a commercial service that charges by the page, the cost should be in line with other "office supplies" and not a limiting factor.

Our authors mostly recognize this: half of the manuscripts they send us are "disposable", to be recycled rather than returned if we don't buy them. When you combine that with the high proportion of submissions from new writers, you can see why my first assumption is that an author who wants the manuscript returned is interested in seeing whatever feedback Rachel and I may have on it. Naturally, if a manuscript comes with an explicit request that it be returned unmarked, I do my best to accommodate that, but it can be hard to remember to treat one manuscript differently in the middle of a large stack.

— MZB

COVERING THE OPTIONS (OR OPTIONING THE COVERS)
Robin F. Holly, Bristol NH

I was very curious to note the cover art for **THE BEST OF MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY MAGAZINE** as being from the *Analog* July 1993 issue. It was also used on *Analog* promotional T-shirts in 1993. It seemed like a surprising choice for cover art on an anthology of stories from another magazine. Especially since there have been some wonderful *MZBFM* covers they could have used. Was this just a whim on the part of the publisher?

It was the publisher's choice; you would have to ask them. — MZB

GENDER (IM)BALANCE?
Richard W. Ramsden, Naples FL

When I submitted a story to your magazine a short while ago, you suggested I order a copy because I might not like it. I found your publication at a local newsstand and browsed through it. I did not find a single male author. Did I buy your magazine? No! Will I submit any more stories to your publication? No!

I don't recall saying you might not like the magazine. But it may be that your style of fantasy writing is not likely to appeal to either Marion or me, or that the style of fantasy which we like to publish does not appeal to you. Most writers find that it pays to be familiar with a publication before trying to sell to it. (For example, Worlds of Fantasy and Horror *(formerly* Weird Tales*) is interested in submissions of horror fiction but our magazine is not.)*

We certainly publish male authors — witness this issue's cover story — and lots of our artists are male as well. But perhaps because Marion is best known for her Darkover novels and ***MISTS OF AVALON****, both our readership base and the majority of the writers who send us fiction* **do** *tend to be female. The lineup is a balance between serious and funny stories, short ones and long ones. If Marion and I have created a lineup without any male writers, it was entirely unintentional.*

—REH

Just out of curiosity, I checked. We have never published an issue with no male authors, although sometimes you have to check the bio to find out what the initials stand for. Consider that if women had refused to deal with publishers who had not previously published female writers, sf might well be an all-male field today.

—HRJ

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Artwork by Vincent DiFate

Dragon-in-Law

by Connie Hirsch

When Paul left to bring his mother back to our hotel it took me exactly half an hour to come down with screaming nerves. I mean, I'd been *nervous*, but it had been leavened by the electric thrill of Paul's presence. We were young, in love, and newly engaged — need I say more?

Call my nerves the downside of a whirlwind courtship. In the six weeks since we'd met, we'd gone from making eyes at each other, to making excuses to meet, to making out, to mak-

ing love. There hadn't been much time to learn about each other's background. For that, we had years ahead of us!

The problem was, after Paul gave me a temporary-goodbye kiss and left — well, he'd *left*, and the intoxication of his presence had evaporated, like bubbles out of champagne. Leaving me with all the questions I'd been too happy to contemplate during our flight to Springfield. Would his mother like me, would I like her — in fact, what did I know about his mother, other than Paul had one?

I paced the earth-tone plush carpeting of the hotel room, thinking over our too-brief midnight confessions. Hardly anything about her, aside from the name: Millicent Smael. A strange name; what could she be like?

I needed out; I needed air and natural beauty, not hotel air-conditioning and corporate art, if I wanted to keep what was left of my sanity. I looked at my watch. Paul had said it would take two hours to drive to his mother's house, pick her up, bring her back. I'd asked why we just didn't visit her together. Paul had hemmed and hawed, and finally mumbled something about "neutral ground."

There was this *look* in his green eyes, so I didn't push. He'd mentioned his mother had high standards for daughters-in-law, and I began to suspect that he planned at least an hour of that drive to impress on her just how special this particular girl was.

So I put on my coat and went for a walk along the riverfront park. For safety, I turned my engagement ring backwards so the little diamond — Paul and I referred to it as The Pebble in deference to its size — didn't show. It was still so new that I couldn't be casual about it.

Downtown and midmorning: all the worker bees are in their corporate hives. There I am, power-walking along, in comfortable solitude on the path when this huge shadow passes over me, like a plane, but moving much slower. So I look up ... and there's this *dragon* swooping down in front of me, legs half-bent to give it a soft landing, big scaly wings canted forward like parachutes. It was fantastic, hallucinatory: except for the noise of feathers, and a breeze that made my hair stream back.

Okay, you may say, "So why didn't you scream, or faint, or run away and get yourself admitted to the nearest Home for the Flummoxed? *I* would have." It's like this: a dragon gives off such *thereness* that you simply can't disbelieve your senses. If anything, seeing a dragon will convince you just how sane you are.

And as for screaming or fainting ... well, dragons have this aura of invincibility, too. I knew in my bones that silly behavior could get me killed, maybe, but if I stayed calm and used my head I might get out of this in one piece, unbarbecued.

The dragon stared down with these amazing green eyes. It was a handsome beast, not what I expected in a dragon; it was covered with feathery scales, speckled black and white, like a deranged checkerboard.

"Hello." I had to say something, might as well be polite. "Can I be of help?"

The dragon just stared, and I thought a wave of confusion emanated from it when I didn't cut and run, like a cat when its rightful prey growls and bares little rodent incisors. Then a curious thing happened: the dragon furled its wings close, seeming to get smaller.

And smaller, and smaller, the neck and tail telescoping into the body, nose pushing up into a shrinking face. The dragon shrank down to human size; a gray-haired woman only slightly taller than me, dressed in a checkered business suit, wearing a white hat adorned with a spray of black feathers. She had green eyes ... and a face that was the distaff version of Paul's.

I stared, and she stared back, coldly. There was a slight breeze but it didn't so much as ruffle the hat feathers. "So," she said. "You'll be the young woman who thinks she's going to marry my son, Paul."

This didn't startle me nearly as much as you think — my startle-muscle was well and truly sprained — and I'd already made up my mind to be brave. "Please call me Barbara," I said. "You'll be Mrs. Smael, then? I didn't expect to meet you so soon. Paul was driving up to fetch you."

"So he said," she sniffed. "But I thought to spare him some useless argument ... and heartbreak in the long run. I already have a wife picked out for him — and you're not her."

I stared. "I thought arranging marriages got left behind when the boat sailed from the Old Country," I said. "Have you informed Paul of this?"

"He knows," she said. "He doesn't agree yet, but he'll come around."

"You're so positive," I said. "He has other ideas."

A slight frown pressed her lips down, but the proud look in her eyes never wavered. "He'll grow out of them," she said. "Given enough time. You're not the first girl he's brought home to meet me, you know."

Paul and I had never discussed previous loves or engagements, but I'm not so naive to think I'd be Paul's first. It *would* explain his nervousness. "I hoped to make a better first impression, Mrs. Smael," I said.

She almost smiled, but caught herself. "You have more spirit than the others," she said. "I'm sure you'll make some other young man — with a less complicated ancestry — a very good wife. But my Paul is not meant for you."

"I plan to make Paul a good wife," I said. "I'd just hoped to get along with my mother-in-law while I did it."

"Please," she said, rolling her eyes. If she weren't so dead set against me I could almost like her. In the next moment I forgot liking entirely, because she focused that green gaze on me — like having emerald lasers burning into my brain, my will. "Go back to your room, pack and leave now. You can't possibly make him happy; I'm sorry, but you just won't do."

The pressure was tremendous ... but I come from a long line of strong-willed women. "I don't think so," I said, and she let out a long puff of smoke, like a three-pack-a-day cigarette addict.

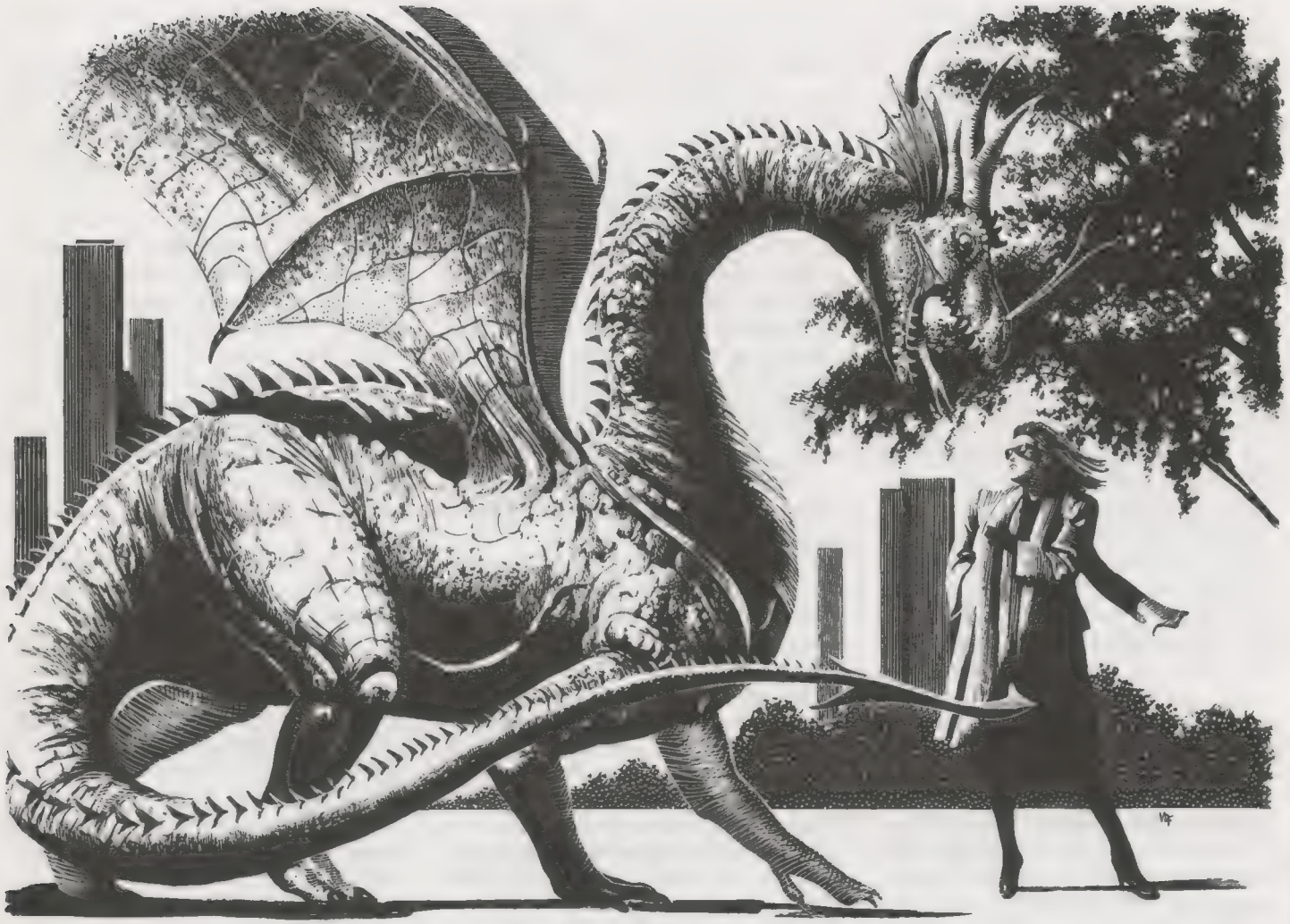
"What makes you think I just won't ... eat you?" she said. I was definitely getting a migraine from the pressure.

"You haven't yet," I said. "It's one thing to scare a fiancée off, but Paul would never forgive you if you killed one."

She raised an eyebrow, and I found myself considering places to duck from flames. There wasn't much cover. My bravado must have worked; she just blew another plume of smoke. "We'll see," was all she said. "Paul won't want to go against the wishes of his mother."

"I really don't think — " I started to say, but it came out slower and slower, and by the time I got to the 'ink', I really was telling the truth.

"You'll go back to the hotel room," Mrs. Smael said. I felt myself nod in agreement. "You'll get packed. You'll phone the airline and change your reservation for the earliest flight back." I nodded: this was all suddenly making



Artwork by Vincent DiFate

sense, seeming right. I wondered why I hadn't seen it before. "You'll go back to your life before you met Paul, and you shan't be unhappy." Of course! Wasn't it nice of her to make sure I wasn't going to be unhappy?

She turned away without a backward glance, starting to run down the path. As she ran, she went through a metamorphosis back into dragon form, her limbs growing long, her wings unfurling, until she hit takeoff speed and soared into the sky. I watched peacefully as she circled once, gaining height, and then she went like a shot into the North.

I turned and jogged back to the hotel room, full of purpose and bedazzlement.

It was The Pebble that saved me. Robotically, I'd gone straight to the room and started packing, but I caught my forgotten engagement ring on some pantyhose — I hadn't remembered that I'd turned it around for protection. I stared at that little chip of diamond, letting it catch the light, wondering where it had come from, until suddenly, I *did* remember. Call it a ring of power and giggle if you must, but it brought me out of Mrs. Smael's spell.

I had a good long while to think before Paul got back. I was out on the balcony doing my nails in the sun, when there was a hesitant knock on the door. "Coming," I said, and I heard a key in the lock.

It was Paul, pale and sick with worry. He stared at me. "I was afraid you'd ... left," he said. "I didn't know Mother was on her way," he added miserably. "I got to her house, and there was a note on the door saying she'd gone off to Springfield to scare you away."

"Oh, honey," I said. I hugged him, heedless of my sticky nails.

Later, I said, "You should have told me, you know."

"I tried ... I mean, I kept hinting about ... dragons, but it sounds so ... crazy," he said. "You see it so rarely these days, and most people just won't believe you. I figured, you'd get to meet her, and we'd get her to *show* you, and then you could decide whether you wanted to marry into my crazy family."

"I'm not marrying your family," I said. "I'm marrying you." I paused. "You're not ... ?" I said delicately.

Paul stared at me, and I could have plotted a mathematical graph of how it sank in. "Oh, no!" he said. "Dragons only crop up once or twice a generation in my family."

I thought about that. "That's a relief," I said. "It makes stuff I was going to tell you about my family into small potatoes."

"'Going to tell you'?" he said, taking my hand. "Have you ... she didn't change your mind about marrying me, did she?"

"Oh, Paul," I said. "It'll take more than smoke to change my mind!" I considered his look. "What's more important is this — is it okay with you if your

mother doesn't go for me?"

"You don't know her," he said. "She'll make our life a living hell if we don't have her blessing. For me ... I don't care, I've lived under her thumb long enough — you should have seen how she carried on when I insisted on moving out for college. But she wouldn't hurt me, of course; you would be a different case."

"So, she's chased away a few prospective daughters-in-law, has she?" I said, thoughtfully.

"Not anybody I'd ever *proposed* to," he said. "And only two, and we were only getting to know one another, anyway. Not like *us*."

That was a relief, and strengthened my resolve. "I don't suppose we could just live in Minneapolis, and um, phone on Christmas Day, like that?"

Paul looked distressed. "Mom's really a good person, but the dragon thing makes her too forceful, sometimes. I thought if we talked, explained what you meant to me... my choice would be okay."

"Well," I said. "You can still talk to her, then."

"I'd have stayed at the house and waited for her to get back, but I had to see ... she might have scared you off."

"Not me, no way," I said with a smile. "And if your *reasoning* with her doesn't do the trick, we still have other options."

Paul left posthaste for his mom's. I still had most of the afternoon, so I hied myself down to the Springfield Public Library, an ivy-trimmed edifice left over from the days when temples of knowledge were in style. The librarian didn't even blink when I inquired after dragon reference materials, and helped me collect an armload of books, not to mention pamphlets and photocopied articles.

Dragon-hunting, and dragon-killing, were explained in great and gory detail — finding missing scales in the soft underbelly, aiming for the eyes, even a scheme for stopping up the nostrils — but there was vanishing little about the fine art of changing a dragon's mind.

But I kept reading. Sometimes humans became dragons because of magic rings or curses — I suppose that happened to one of Paul's ancestors. Mrs. Smael hadn't worn any funny jewelry that I remembered - just a tasteful string of pearls.

There was always magic to fall back on: divining the dragon's true name, and commanding it by that. I wondered if I could locate her birth certificate — no, if it were that simple, surely Paul or another family member would have done it by now.

What I needed was *How to Win Friends and Influence Dragons*, but unaccountably the publishing industry had let me down.

I stayed at my post until the bell clanged for closing, gathered up photocopied pages of pertinent stuff for later reading, and headed back to the hotel. Paul was still out, so I ordered from room service and hit the books again. I began to think my only chance might well be hand-to-hand combat. I wondered if I could borrow an asbestos suit from the Fire Department. Then I wondered if I could get an asbestos wedding gown made up special.

By the time a vision of a wedding cake being slowly roasted was floating in my mind, Paul came back. He looked weary; his shoulders slumped, and he had those little lines around his eyes.

"She didn't go for your arguments," I said.

"I did my best," he said. "She's positive she's going to find the right girl for me."

"And I don't even get a chance to strut my stuff," I said. "Well, we'll see about that. Tomorrow I'm going to pay her a social call and put on my best manners."

"Barbara, you can't mean — " Paul said. He looked horrified.

I rolled over and gave him a long level look. "Has your mother in fact ever eaten anybody?" I said.

"Well — no," he said. "A couple of yappy dogs the neighbors used to keep ... but no people. Yet."

"She's not real likely to start with me," I said. "Okay, so tomorrow I beard the dragon in her den ... or her living room. Wherever she serves tea."

At that point Paul and I had our first disagreement ... well, fight. I won't bore you with the details, other than to say I realize now that he was worried about my safety. Eventually we agreed to go see his mother together the next morning, on the theory that she was less likely to fricassee me right in front of her son.

Then we made up, kissed and cuddled, and I got Paul to tell me more about his family. Dragons usually cropped up on the distaff side, though there was a great-great-uncle who had played an unfortunate role in the Great Chicago Fire. In fact, Mrs. Smael's mother was a dragon - making her Paul's grand-dragon, I suppose.

"So, did she arrange your mother's marriage?" I said.

"I think she did," said Paul with a frown. "It didn't turn out very well."

"Hmmm," I said. I began to incubate a strategy, but it was already way late. No point in fighting dragons before I had to ....

I confess: I had lied to Paul to settle the argument. I got up, dressed, and left while he slept, leaving a sweet little note on my pillow. Paul needs his eight hours, and we'd been up late. I knew it would be hours before he'd wake. Better I should have my little chat with Mrs. Smael — without Paul to listen to her opinion of my forward nature. Besides, there was a prior stop I wanted to make.

Just finding her place was an adventure in itself; the family home lay on the end of an unmarked dirt road, and I got blank looks from the locals when I asked for Mrs. Smael's place. But when I said I was looking for the dragon lady, they were quick with the directions.

I overshot her yellow mailbox at the head of the lane, so it was past ten when I pulled into the yard. I didn't know what I expected the house of a dragon to look like, something more in the cave line. This was a nice white Greek Revival house, with pillars on the front stoop and a high arched window over the front door, with a heavy brass knocker - a dragon's head - the only concession to the nature of its mistress.

The knocker stared at me, baleful and final. I stiffened my upper lip, adjusted my newly-bought Foster-Grants, and slammed the brass against its plate, a heavy knocking — I hoped it wasn't a death knell. Full of this happy thought, I waited until the door was thrown open — by a maid in a starched white apron.

She was a meek-looking little thing, Hispanic I guess. "I'm here to see Mrs. Smael," I said. "I'm her future daughter-in-law, Barbara Chant."

"Does Mistress know you're coming?" said the maid doubtfully.

"Frankly, no," I said. "But it's important that I speak to her, privately, as soon as possible."

"I'll see if she'll receive you," said

Artwork by Vincent DiFate

the maid, reaching for the knob of the door, but I cut her off, stepping inside the foyer before she could stop me.

"I'm not giving her an opportunity to say no," I said. "Therefore, I'm not going to wait while she makes up some excuse not to see me. You may as well lead me right to her."

The maid had looked meek, but she started to argue anyway. A point in my future mother-in-law's favor, if she could get this much loyalty. I was prepared to follow the maid, but then Mrs. Smael walked onto the second-floor landing to see what the noise was about.

"You!" she said, surprised, and blowing a faint mist of smoke.

"Hello, Mrs. Smael," I said, walking around the maid, who was still protesting, and going to the foot of the stairs. "Shall I come up or will you come down?" I said.

"I couldn't stop her, Ma'am," the maid protested.

"It's not your fault, Consuela," said Mrs. Smael. "Why don't you see to the kitchen just now; Miss Chant and I have much to ... discuss." She was dressed in a pair of clamdiggers and a sporty polo shirt, her hair pulled back by a band — nice and unpretentious, just like the furnishings of the foyer. At least I wouldn't be marrying into tacky taste, that is if I could just work it out so I'd be marrying.

The maid gave me a nervous glance, like she was memorizing my face to identify me down at the morgue, and left. Real encouraging. Mrs. Smael and I stood there until the door swung shut.

"Just what do you think you're doing here, Miss Chant?" said Mrs. Smael. "I believe I've made my position clear. There's no point in another meeting."

"On the contrary," I said. I was getting a crick in my neck from looking up, so I climbed the stairs; I didn't want her to have any more psychological advantage. "You want Paul to marry a girl you approve of, so I insist you get an opportunity to approve of me."

She put her hands on her hips as I drew level; I could feel those green eyes trying to bore through my sunglasses, and I was grateful for the extra UV protection the advertisers had promised. If I got out of this I'd be happy to provide them a testimonial.

"What's *that* in your hair?" she said. "Holly and rowan? Really, I hope you don't put much faith in such superstitious claptrap. What else are you going to try, wolfbane and silver? Wooden stakes and garlic?"

I touched the garland I was wearing. "It's just for luck," I said with a smile. Actually, I wanted it for effect, and for an entry into conversation. "You wouldn't believe how hard it is to find a rowan tree in Springfield." In the Horticultural Garden, to be precise.

"You're very resourceful, I'm sure," she said coolly. "Young woman, do you realize how carefully a bride for a man of Paul's ancestry must be chosen?"

I put my hands on my hips, echoing her position, and I noted she immediately shifted her hands, unwilling to share even this much. Good, I had her on the run.

"No, I don't," I said. She had looked away; now she looked back. "Why don't you tell me just what you're looking for in a daughter-in-law?" She was silent. "I'm sure you want someone who isn't bothered by the dragon-stuff, right?"

She pursed her lips. "That would do for a start, yes."

"Well, let's just accept that for a given with me," I said.

"Oh yes?" she said. "And what if a child of yours shares the family ... heritage?"

I shrugged. "Every child is special," I said. "And I'm sure Granma would be available for advice."

"It's easy to say now," she said. "Paul will marry a girl from a family I know."

"You have some woman picked out already?"

She narrowed her eyes at me; I could feel it, even through the sunglasses. "I don't believe that is any of your business," she said.

"But it's Paul's business, yes?" I said. She stared. "Yes," I said. "And since he proposed to me, and I said yes, it's my business, too. You may have decided that you have the right to pick out your son's wife, but he hasn't given you that right, and it isn't yours to claim."

"I have had enough of this," she announced, turning away, her back straight. I let her get two steps down

the hall.

"No, you haven't," I said. "Tell me, was *your* marriage arranged? How did *it* turn out?"

Her head snapped back towards me; and even as she turned, she lost human shape and expanded, her claws ripping furrows in the carpet. This was faster than I expected; I took a couple of steps back, just enough to keep from being knocked over. She fit into the hallway like a cat in a shoebox, her head hanging over me like the figurehead on a ship ... only most figureheads don't have teeth the size of small bananas. She let out a breath of steamy smoke, warm and surprisingly fragrant with cinnamon and wood.

"You will get out of here, now," she said, those huge green eyes trying to draw me in. Behind my glasses I crossed my eyes, though it was an effort to do anything but move my feet. I felt my fists clenched, and The Pebble, turned backwards for safety, bit into my left palm to remind me of my promise to Paul. A "magic ring" of commitment versus an ancient curse; the symbolism strengthened my resolve.

My head was full of bees; that *will* was beating down on me like it was a mop and I was a floor. I teetered, my left heel hanging over the top step of the stairs. Nearly losing my balance distracted me just enough that it broke the spell she was casting, though I didn't dare those eyes again yet.

"Not until you've sat down and given me a proper tryout as a daughter-in-law," I said. "You'd decided before you'd even met me. You have to admit that's unfair."

I don't believe it was the wisdom of my words that was getting through to her; I think it was the fact that she'd finally come up against someone who wasn't cowed. It may have been a close thing, but she didn't have to know it ... ever.

For a good long moment she held still, and I kept my eyes crossed until tears were running down my nose. Then she retreated slightly, sitting back as it were, and I thought she would speak — but the doorbell rang, an amazingly prosaic sound in that charged atmosphere. I felt like a condemned prisoner freed by a rooster's crow, and I turned away to look at the hazy outline of someone standing outside the curtains.

There was a whoosh of air, and I turned back to see Mrs. Smael in human form again. "Who can that be?" she said. "Young woman, we'll continue this ... discussion in a moment."

Even that was a victory. She brushed past me straight-backed, and I followed her down the stairs and watched as she opened the door. There was a small, white-haired, green-eyed woman there, dressed primly in a flowery lace frock. "Mother!" Mrs. Smael exclaimed, and Paul's grandmother came inside, wiping her feet on the doormat. "Barbara!" she said, pleased. "I see you didn't get eaten. That's a good start."

Mrs. Smael was open-mouthed. Her mother nodded at her daughter, my future mother-in-law. "We'll be needing to have a family discussion now, Millicent," she said. "Please, would you ask Consuela to bring tea for three? Planning a wedding is such dry work."

Later that night, after we'd had a private celebratory dinner, Paul and I snuggled together on the balcony. "I can't believe you called in my grandmother!" he said. "Why ever did you do that?"

I left off nibbling his ear and smiled. "I thought I could out-argue your mother ... and I bet I would have, too," I said. "But I needed some backup insurance ... and it occurred to me that one of the ways to defeat a dragon is to get a bigger dragon on *your* side.

"So I stopped by your grandmother's, and introduced myself, showed her The Pebble, talked about how young people these days were responsible enough to take care of finding a spouse. Charmed her, basically."

"Actually, I think she'd just like some great-grandchildren," said Paul. He was grinning incredulously.

"Well, those might have come up in our conversation, yes," I said, grinning back. "If we hadn't hit it off, I wouldn't have been in a worse position with your mom, so it was worth a try."

I would have said more, but he kissed me, and I kissed back. Then, right in the middle he broke off. "Hey," he said. "Tell me, are we going to have to go through all this when I meet your mother?"

I stroked his hair. "Oh, no, Mom's much more reasonable," I said. "You'd really have to be awful to get a cold reception ...."

Paul looked at me with a tilt to his head. "'But,'" he said. "There's a 'but' attached to that sentence, I swear I heard it just then."

I rolled my eyes. "Well ... " I said. "Just — if you're wise, you'll never, ever, ever, *ever*, refer to your mother-in-law as a witch. She's kind of sensitive about that...."

❄

Connie Hirsch fell into her current profession of computer programming by taking karate — her *sensei* recommended her for a job as a data entry clerk at Lotus, back when one could advance through the ranks. She attended Clarion West '91 and has sold eleven short stories including this one. Her proudest literary feats are getting paid to read comic books, and most recently, getting paid to interview ***Star Trek*** actors and producers. She is currently working on a quasi-Victorian dark fantasy novel, which if it were funny would be called *Charles Dickens Never Mentioned Werewolves.*

Vincent DiFate worked in animated films before turning to freelance artwork. He received a Hugo as Best Professional Artist in 1979 as well as the Skylark and the Lensman Awards. He is regarded as one of the world's major illustrators of futuristic themes, including astronomical and aerospace themes for the National Geographic Society, CBS television, and NASA. Workman published **DiFATE'S CATALOG OF SCIENCE FICTION HARDWARE** in 1980. He is a past president of ASFA and was the Artist Guest of Honor at the 1992 WorldCon.

Ed. note: The font used for the story title is called Dragonwick.

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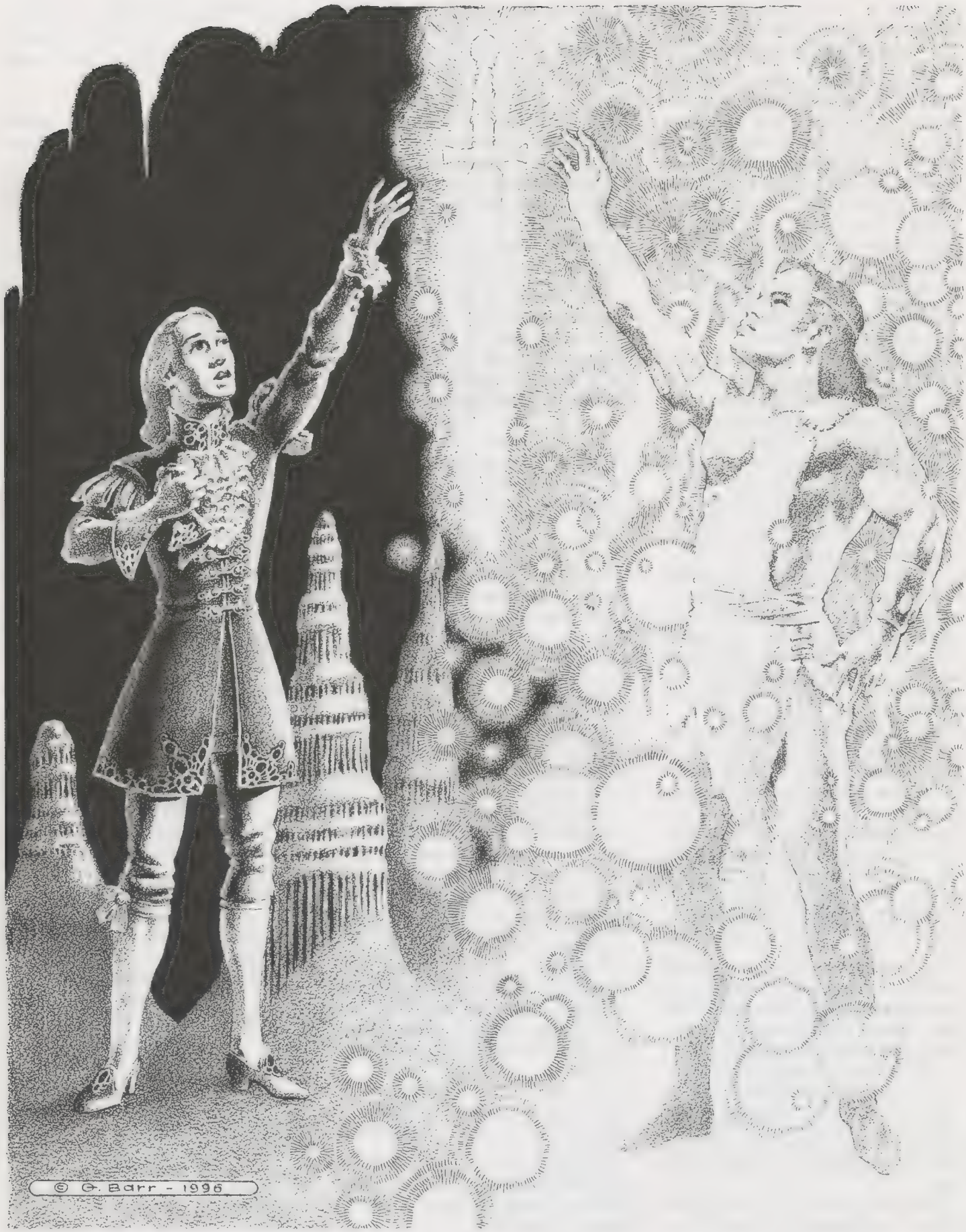


Artwork by George Barr

by eluki bes shahar

The dreaming city of Traunheim was known throughout the Shadow Kingdoms for the swords it forged: ensouled through murder, annealed in blood, unbreakable, unstoppable, sentient, hungry, and terrifying. From Traunheim's gates inlaid with human bone, its lords and ladies went forth armed with the Swords of Night to exact tribute throughout the penumbral world.

But as even the blackest seems less black when drowned in fuligent and nyctalopean shadows, so the hell-princes of Traunheim, when resident in that fabled red stone city and among their own kind, seemed nearly human, though inevitably their amusements were not for the delicate.

As ruling princes must, the duke of Traunheim, one Nisroch, wielder of the sword Ghularel, had a son and heir, who, when the time came, went to the sea-caves below the city, there to choose from all the armory of Night the sword that he would bear into battle.

But the swords of Traunheim were so very much more than swords ...

His name was Verlaine, and someday he would be the Hellduke of Traunheim. Today he was sixteen.

And far more concerned with living to be seventeen, Verlaine told his imaginary chronicler.

He regarded his reflection in the mirror, weighing the actual possibilities of assassination. He was forced to regard them as slender indeed: while it was true that the princes of the city were ambitious, it was equally true that his father the Duke was perilously efficient both in maintaining his power and increasing his dominion.

Thus, having done nothing lately to displease his father, the heir to Traunheim must consider himself safe.

Probably.

Verlaine shook his wrists so that the rills of lace, delicate as moonbeams, would lie properly against his jewelled hands. He glanced up to see how his valet was proceeding in the matter of his coat, and surprised his own reflection looking at him. He regarded it with a new critical interest.

Verlaine's mother had been a captive woman from the Daylands, and though he had the garnet eyes that marked him as a true son of his father, he had his mother's slenderness and mouse-blonde hair. Verlaine did not consider himself particularly vain, but the Dream Court had learned that the prince's appearance was discussed at its peril.

Did it matter? Was how he looked who he was?

Was he too weak to be his father's son?

"Your coat, my lord."

Verlaine turned toward the valet, glanced at the coat, and nodded a curt approval. He turned his back again, and allowed the man to slide the tight garment of silk-lined glove leather onto his arms and pluck at it until the long skirts stiffened with razor-thin steel boning hung properly about his legs. Verlaine ran his hands over the embroidered, gem-encrusted facings and shook his lace out one last time.

"Very good," he said, as such graciousness was expected of one who would someday rule Traunheim and perhaps all of the Shadow Kingdoms as well.

The valet handed him his gloves. Verlaine waved to him to withdraw.

"Ready to go?" a bright, familiar — and unwelcome — voice asked. Ariah stepped out from behind the tapestry that concealed one of the better-known secret passages into Verlaine's rooms.

Ariah was his half-sister, the only one of his female siblings who had not been given to the Tree. Last year she had chosen her sword, and now wore Dalkiel belted at her hip.

"What are you doing here?" Verlaine said ungraciously, not looking up from adjusting his gloves.

"I came to bring you this," Ariah said. She walked over to the table beside the window and placed what she carried upon it. Despite himself, Verlaine looked.

A scabbard, open so that everyone could instantly judge the blade he carried, jewelled and carved with the symbols that told the history of his noble bloodline.

"You'll need it. Probably," Ariah said, stroking Dalkiel.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Verlaine demanded. He rounded on her, his hand dropping to the dagger that hung solitary from his swordbelt.

Ariah took a step backward, freeing Dalkiel from its scabbard with a hiss.

"Don't threaten me, brother. He doesn't like it."

Verlaine's hand tightened on his dagger. "Don't threaten me with Dalkiel's dislikes, sister. *Father* doesn't like it."

"Touchy, aren't you?" There was a black flicker, and Dalkiel was returned to the scabbard. "Find a blade today and I'll gladly apologize — if you can make me."

"Go away," Verlaine invited.

"Or don't you think you will?" she mocked.

"We have had the same tutors," Verlaine reminded her with well-assumed boredom, donning that social mask with the ease of long practice.

"'*Here are the swords of Traunheim; here are their wielders all: to each one sword and no other; for each their enemies fall,*'" Ariah singsonged.

"Where did you learn that Daylands' nonsense?" Verlaine demanded. "Next you will be retailing me that stale *on-dit* of Lady Isahua, who in her cups mistook her sword for her latest lover and eviscerated herself."

Ariah yelped with laughter. "Well, you have to admit it was *funny*, Ver — blood everywhere and her husband baying about assassins when it was Jachniel all the time. And now the feromancers say that Isahua and Jachniel are *together* in the blade and so it cannot be returned to the Swordhouse."

"Why not?" Verlaine asked, before he could stop himself.

Ariah regarded him with smug superiority. "And who would wield it, brother dear? Man or woman? Swords go to their match, everyone knows that. Isahua-Jachniel will have to be broken."

"And what of you and Dalkiel?" Verlaine asked, striking out at random. "Are you tempted?"

Ariah stepped forward and slapped him. Verlaine was reaching for his dagger when Ariah laughed.

"Ask me tonight, brother — if you dare to," she said, more laughter in her voice.

There were courtiers to conduct the Hellduke's son, as protocol demanded, through the passages he had known all his life: past the public rooms and private chambers, through the dungeons where he had been an interested spectator in childhood, into the forge where wizards shaped the Swords of Night. The Armsmaster was waiting for him there, Cellant who had been his first tutor.

Knife and spear, bow and dagger — but never the sword. Until now.

"Are you ready to choose, Prince Verlaine?" Cellant asked, as protocol dictated he must.

"I am ready," Verlaine replied, because he had to.

Cellant turned and Verlaine followed him, and at length they came to the barred door of the armory that hid Traunheim's greatest treasures from the world.

"Beyond this door are those swords from which you may choose," Cellant said, taking a key from his belt. The key made a high sweet grinding sound as it turned in the lock, and the sound of the bolts, as they were thrown back, boomed through the sea-cave like cannonshot.

The door was open. Cellant turned to go.

"Wait!" His voice was high and frightened, and Verlaine cursed himself for it. "How will I know which sword I should choose?" he said, forcing his voice lower.

"There is only one sword for you," Cellant promised. "You will know it."

He was — He had been —

He had no name.

He remembered his last moments of freedom. The sun-bright slopes of his border homeland, standing among his men, his sword merely steel, against the cavalry center of the Shadow army on their painted horses. If he could only hold them here until his engineers could bring the catapults up the sides of the pass, until his archers could reach their positions, there would be a chance.

There had been no chance. His last sight in freedom had been the enemy horsemen, charging uphill and still invincible, rainbow light from their souled swords flinging back the sunlight, and then —

Pain. Darkness and pain. They had not even granted him a clean hero's death.

Death?

Was he dead? Who was he — who had he been? What was the homeland — *where* was the homeland he had

Artwork by George Barr

fought so to defend?

At the thought of battle he felt joy and strength surge through him. A thousand strategies, diversions, attacks, were his to consider. He was certain of victory — this time.

But he did not know his name.

Verlaine stood before the unbound door, listening to Cellant's footsteps fade away. Pass through that door and he would become a man. Choose a sword and he would choose his life. No one would tell him what to do and everyone said it was easy.

He tugged at his coat, adjusting what did not need it, and plucked nervously at the cuffs of his thin silk gloves. He was a prince of the dreaming city. Any choice he made would be right. Boldly he thrust open the armory door.

It didn't move. Verlaine shoved harder, and at last it moved, grudgingly, sliding inward along the track worn in the stone.

And he was inside.

This was the oldest part of Traunheim. Verlaine looked up, imagining his father holding court hundreds of feet above. The ceiling of the chamber was lost in darkness.

But there was light. Sea-cool, phosphorescent, many-colored; it came not from torches or perfumed candles, but from the blades of the swords racked here, each crafted from the blood and bone and soul of some living creature, whether human or otherwise.

Here were the black blades crafted from the hellprinces unlucky or heroic enough to have been granted this form of immortality. A thousand years ago the queen who was his father's sword, Ghularel, had ruled Traunheim until, dying of her battle wounds, she had given herself to the swordmakers. Her son had carried her into battle and at his death she had come here, to await Verlaine's father.

Verlaine passed on, past the blades, darker even than those, that held not one soul but a thousand — swords to tempt only the maddest in a time of desperate need.

Here were the legend-swords, the heroes who had given them life long since anonymous dust: the red sword called Sorrow, the white sword called Justice. He knew all their names — Wing and Battle, Maiden and Dancelord, Shadowkiss, Midnight, Truth — he heard them whisper together like ghosts, and knew these swords, too, were not for him.

Artwork by George Barr

What if, in all this place, there was nothing for him? What if he, like Rachath who had first wielded Ghularel, must wait half his lifetime for his sword to be forged?

Only a lifetime's practice in dissimulation — of lying even when there was no one to see the lie — kept Verlaine from wringing his hands in despair. So many blades. So many choices, and no choice at all.

He passed beyond the racks of swords that had been carried before to those blades whose names only the Armsmaster knew; swords that had been waiting since their forgings for their match to find them. They stood in a long curved rack that made an amphitheater of the space before it, naked and blatant to his gaze.

Was it here? Was his sword here?

Verlaine stepped forward, the soft soles of his dress boots whispering quietly on the smooth stone of the floor. Rank on rank, his destiny lay before him. He could hear it. He could feel it. A thousand razored doors, leading him down a thousand paths to the throne of Traunheim.

He *would* be Duke. He *would* rule. Today he would choose a sword from Traunheim's deadly archives, and no one would whisper about Prince Verlaine and his Daylight mother ever again.

He stepped forward, recklessly intending to seize the first sword he reached and put an end to this indecision.

No.

Verlaine jerked back as if he'd been stung, his hand still hanging inches away from the sword's hilt. Its haft was studded with tiny rubies like beads of blood, and its blade held a red sheen as of reflected firelight.

Her name was Abracel, and in his mind's eye he saw her, red-robed, her fingers curved like gold-barbed claws, her flaming hair a flaunting scarlet cloak. All madness, all luxurious desire, rapacious and insatiable —

No. He withdrew his hand and felt the sword's ghostly laughter brush him. Abracel was not for him.

They whispered their histories to him, with the assurance of spirits who knew his choice was foreordained.

— A sword shining, pale, and cold: virgin sorceress in his grandfather's time, betrayed by her order in exchange for a clemency that Traunheim did not grant them.

— A blade smoke-darkened, that carried like an aura the clangor of battle and the hard fellowship of the road.

And among them, the one that would complete him, make him whole as the hellprinces of Traunheim were whole.

It was silver, silver as the dream of steel, starkly plain among the jewelled swords surrounding it. Its haft was braided silver, its quillons spread like sleek gray wings, crafted all in one glorious sweep of intention, beautiful to his eyes as no other here.

He slid his hand around the haft with sudden calm assurance and lifted it free.

Cold. Then heat, warmth, as the sword claimed him, in turn, for its own.

He had no name, but he remembered very well. The battles to unite the tribes of his savage mountain kingdom. The battles to gain his throne — and keep it. The comradeship of his swordbrother, all hot eyes and laughing courage. That much remained, when even his swordbrother's name was taken from him. He had been given a very long time to think, though little information to think upon, until all that remained was the desire to take up the playing of the greatest game of all.

War.

He could fight — any warrior must, to be called a man — but he was more. General and king, he knew the wars waged so that they did not end in battle; the wars where enemies died upon a sigh and lived to preside over the ruin of all their hopes. War was kingship — kingship was war.

He knew that humanity had been taken from him somehow in the Hellduke's armories, but he didn't care even for that. More than death he hated this waiting.

He wanted to *do.*

And then, out of the dark numbness that surrounded him, he felt light and warmth approach. Freedom, and more than freedom.

His purpose and his name.

Verlaine stood in a nowhere noplace. Cold wind whipped around him as he looked for the spirit bound into the sword, the woman who would complete him.

It would be a woman, Verlaine reminded himself with an effort, no matter how awkward and uncomfortable their real-world company made him, the sword-spirit would be different.

Would it really? an inner voice mocked him.

He stood alone, reminding himself that none of this was happening, that he still stood in the sea-cave beneath his father's throne room, a sword in his hand. Safe.

But what if he wasn't?

What if this were a false sword, an attempt to steal his soul and kill him? The thought frightened him for a moment, until he thought of a worse.

What if the sword didn't want *him*?

In a moment the possible rebuff became real; fear warmed into a passionate hatred of everyone who had ever dismissed him as inferior or insignificant. How dare the spirit of the sword not even come to *see*?

"Come out!" Verlaine shouted. "Show yourself — I demand it!"

The mist brightened into hard-edged light. He heard the boy cry out beyond the ridge, and did not stop to question where boy and ridge had come from. He gained the crest of it and saw the boy, standing alone on an ice-field, in a world where to be alone was to die.

He would not allow it.

With giant strides he bounded down the frozen slope to where the boy stood gazing about himself as if he were snowblind. Older than he'd first supposed, but still here, still alone, shivering in the cold.

And needing him.

Needing him as no other ever had.

Needing *him.*

Verlaine tried to force away his perceptions, but he could not refuse to see — and more, he did not wish to. The spirit of the sword stood before him, and Verlaine's heart leaped in joyous avowal. Here was not the languor and feline cruelty that he had sensed in the sword Abracel. Here was a spirit cold and bright, joyful and hot, measuring and capable — to supply his lack, to stand closer than a guard or a lover, to bind him to the most unbreakable pact that a hellprince of Traunheim could make.

And not a woman.

"Is it you?" the boy said when he saw him. He reached out a hand, wonderingly, as if he could not believe what he saw, and —

The name

The name burned between them, unuttered, an impalpable third presence. He sought it as one would seek a falcon hung upon the shield of heaven, knowing it was just beyond reach —

Your name

To bring it into being, no matter which of them spoke it, would seal what there was to be between them until this his swordbrother died.

And suddenly he was afraid. *Your name is —*

"I don't care! Don't leave me!" the boy Verlaine said, and suddenly the name was there.

"Fear not," the sword Mashiel promised. "I will never leave you."

"He did *what?*" the Hellduke of Traunheim asked, very quietly.

"He has chosen the sword Mashiel," the Armsmaster said. He stood quietly before the dais.

Nisroch appeared to consider this. His throne was of polished ivory obtained from the bodies of his enemies. His black hair spilled in an oiled and jewelled cascade over his chest, and his garnet eyes flared almost red. He leaned sideways, to where his Master of the Revels stood waiting.

"Raduin, the sword Mashiel: from whom was that crafted?" Nisroch asked, in an oh-so-sweet, oh-so-reasonable voice, though he knew the answer. He knew it, Raduin knew it, the Armsmaster knew it. The entire court knew it. It was their business to know, for was not Traunheim's life its swords?

"From a captured enemy, Your Grace." The duke shot him a scarlet look, and Raduin hurried on. "The

Daylands barbarian they called the Warwolf. He was —"

The Hellduke waved him to silence.

"My son — with murderesses, traitresses, spies, and queens to choose from; with virgin battle-maids, pledged to die before capture, with witches who have pledged their souls, with sorceresses steeped in every arcane art — with all these to choose from, *my son* has taken for his own the soul of a *Daylands barbarian man*?"

Still Nisroch's voice was low, oh-so-reasonable, though all the Court now wished to be elsewhere. And the Armsmaster, who was a brave man, answered.

"Yes, Your Grace. Verlaine has chosen the sword Mashiel."

The Hellduke leaned forward on his ivory throne.

"Tell him to choose again."

"We will not be parted," Verlaine said to Cellant. The sword belted at his hip burned like the ghost of sun on ice, and he stood straight and proud.

"The Duke your father has said —"

"The Duke my father," the prince said in ringing tones, "chose where he loved. As does every noble of the Dream Court. As did I."

Verlaine's gaze met that of his teacher; it was Cellant's that faltered.

"He will not accept that, my prince. He has said it: choose again," Cellant said to the floor.

"He knows I cannot!" Verlaine cried in desperation.

"Were I the Hellduke, Prince Verlaine, with the Hellduke's tastes and temper, and answered so by a child of mine, I should break the sword before him and before all the Court, and ask him one last time."

There was a moment of silence, like the moment when all the power of the coming storm is still contained. When at last Verlaine answered, Cellant felt a pang of relief, and a moment's pity for all those of the Court who thought Verlaine favored his Daylands mother.

"You must tell him I cannot choose again, good Cellant," the prince said softly, "and then we will see what appetite the Duke my father has for play."

Cellant went before the court again. His loyalties, like his heart, were not divided, and he made his return to the throne room take as long as he could.

Nisroch was waiting for him, the functionaries of the Court frozen around him like the victims of a cataclysm. Nisroch fixed him with a hot red amber gaze; Cellant bowed.

"Bring him to me," Nisroch said. "Bring them both to me."

Cellant went first to his rooms and took what he would need most. Then he went to the prince's suite and found what he knew he would find. He sent a page to the stables, already knowing what he would find there as well.

For every noble of Traunheim, a sword; one sword and no other. Her ladies chose the souls of ravished princes for their lovers; her lords chose stolen queens for their bloody handmaids. So it had always been; each to his opposite; hallowed by custom, consecrated by law.

Until now. Until Verlaine had chosen a sword he should not even have wanted.

There was a message fixed to the curtain with a long jewelled pin. Cellant took it down and read it, and then threw it into the fire. The Hellduke Nisroch was no fool. He would not need the message to know the truth.

"Tell him I will return when he accepts my choice."

Oh, yes, my prince, Cellant thought to himself. *When Nisroch accepts your choice — or when you are tired of staying away.*

And then he settled his pack upon his back and set out to follow the hellprince of Traunheim, since the prince was young, and the time that he could challenge his father was not soon.

And Cellant had no desire to end his days a Traunheim sword, now that the Prince had chosen.

❄

ELUKI BES SHAHAR has written a number of stories set, like this one, in Crownland. Among them are "Queeneyes" and "Haut-Clare" previously published in this magazine. She hopes some day to write a longer Crownland piece. She has several sf novels published, including **HELLFLOWER** and **DARKTRADERS** and also writes Regency novels as "Rosemary Edghill" and does a day-job gig at Avon Books.

GEORGE BARR made his first professional art sale in 1960. He recently moved to Livermore, CA, and has been providing illustrations for FANTASY Magazine since its first issue. He won the Hugo as Best Fan artist in 1968 and has been nominated in both Fan Artist and Professional Artist categories, and was Artist Guest of Honor at the 1994 Worldcon.

Artwork by George Barr

An Interview with Poul Anderson

by Raul S. Reyes

This interview took place at Contact, a convention in Mil-pitas CA, in March 1996. It includes occasional comments by Rachel Holmen, indicated by REH.

RSR: Poul Anderson is well known as a fantasy and science fiction writer, and has also done quite a few other genres, including mysteries.

PA: A few.

Why don't you tell me something about your writing career? How did you get started, way back when?

Well, like so many children, I was always telling myself stories and started writing largely for my own amusement. A friend encouraged me to submit one of my stories, and I was quite surprised when it sold. After that one thing led to another. I must have been about twenty then, in college, and of course I only thought I would moonlight at it, as most writers do. But eventually I figured pro writing was what nature had cut me out to do. I had majored in physics.

REH: So you had expected to work in the sciences?

Yes. Well another factor was I realized that, at best, I'd be a mediocre scientist. Eventually, I decided to write full time.

Rather than be a mediocre scientist you became a first-class writer.

Thank you.

Can you tell us the name of your friend?

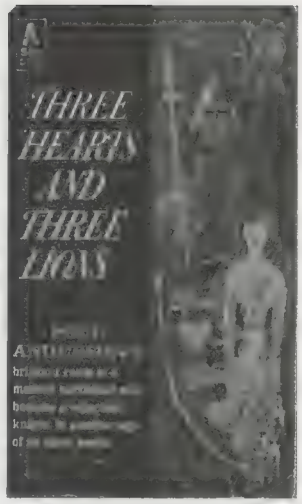
Well, this was many years ago. His name was F.N. Waldrop. I used the initials because the first story of mine resulted from a lot of talking we had done. A good many of the ideas behind it were his, and I thought it was only fair to share the byline. But he never had writing ambitions at all himself. The story was titled "Tomorrow's Children", and was published by *Astounding Science Fiction*, now *Analog*, of course, almost exactly forty-nine years ago. I'm coming up on my fiftieth year of writing now.

Who was the editor back then?

Campbell was editor at *Astounding* then. He took over in 1937 or so. So he'd been at it a hell of a long time already.

So how long did you write science fiction before branching into fantasy?

Actually, I was doing fantasy. In a way, the first novel I ever did was fantasy: **THE BROKEN SWORD**. But it took a long time to find a publisher. It was not the first one actually published. There weren't many [fantasy publishers] — essentially none. The science fiction market at that time was nothing to write home about, either.



*I've read **THE BROKEN SWORD**. What impressed me about it was the scope and breadth of the story. Was it planned that way, or did it write itself? When I read it I was impressed by the work involved in reading it, and I wondered about the work involved in writing it.*

THE BROKEN SWORD was so long ago now. As I seem to remember it, it was almost as if it wrote itself. But that may be my memory softening things. Actually my first published one was a juvenile book which was done on commission: **VAULT OF THE AGES**. They were doing a series of these things, by various writers. I think Chad Oliver did one, and Alan E. Nourse, and various others. Probably my agent arranged it. I think all of the other writers were clients of his at the time.

***VAULT OF THE AGES** at first appeared to be a Middle Ages, barbarian type of story, and then only toward the end did it turn into a post-holocaust type of science fiction story. Did you have a minor in history or is it just a hobby?*

No. Basically, I'm just interested. It's a fascinating field.

How much do you study and research when you're writing a story or novel, or do you know most of it already?

It depends. I always do as much research as possible. I have to be caught up on the history before I feel competent in writing about it, and even then I get things wrong. For example, when Karen [Anderson, Poul's wife] and I were working together on **THE KING OF YS** — which is a fantasy with a historical setting — aside from visiting the area in question a second time to check up on things we hadn't seen before, we put in about a year's work of book research before even starting to write. And then, as we wrote, further research kept showing things that we hadn't realized. I remember we had to go back and do a considerable rewrite because we had a Christian priest doing a baptism, and at that time, around the year 400, the late Roman Empire, priests did not do baptisms; that was an office of the bishop.

So many of your Time Patrol stories involve turning points in history — crucial points where history can diverge into alternate histories. How much study goes into finding a pivot point in history?

Quite a bit, usually. Of course it's always guesswork. Many so-called critical points are overrated. I do not think the battle of Tours decided the fate of Christendom, and I do not think the battle of Gettysburg decided the fate of the United States. Essentially the issue had already been settled, and what was turned back was a sort of massive raid.

And, of course, there are a lot of people who argue that there is essentially no such thing as a critical turning point, that the general trend of events is already overwhelmingly set. Actually, in view of chaos theory, I think there must be times now and then when events are pulled from one attractor

Photo by Rachel E. Holmen

to another.

In one of your Time Patrol stories you write about Scipio Africanus almost being killed at an early battle against Hannibal and how, if that had happened, the Romans might not have been able to finally defeat Hannibal later in Africa.

It's arguable. It made for a story.

REH: Do you occasionally find yourself bending facts to make a good story, or do you stick to them as closely as you can manage?

I try to stick to them as closely as possible. I'll say, in a science fiction story, if you want your character to get to another star in a reasonable time, or travel backwards in time, then you've got to bend your physics way out of shape. But that's sort of acceptable. You can say, maybe we don't have the final answers, and maybe there's some way to do this after all. You know faster-than-light travel and time travel are no longer as disreputable as they used to be. It turns out they are mathematically possible after all, within general relativity. The only question is whether they are physically possible.

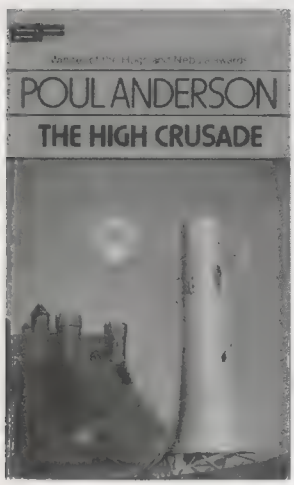
I read a paper some years ago stating that there's no reason you can't travel faster than the speed of light, it's travel at the speed of light that impossible.(Laughter.)

Have you have any problems with people trying to censor your work?

Not seriously. Especially in the old days there would be certain taboos, restrictions, etc., which you don't see anymore. Probably the most amusing one happened to Robert Heinlein once, so I'm told. This was back when he was with *Astounding*, which was being published by Street and Smith — a rather puritanical outfit then, even for those times. I'm told that in the original version of "Methuselah's Children", the mathematical genius Libby was looking at some clouds and remarked that there were some nice fifth order functions and he liked fifth order functions, and that you find them in breasts too. The editors perforce changed breasts to heads. Robert Heinlein was angry because heads are not fifth order equations. Heinlein didn't want his math bollixed up. That sort of thing goes on, now and then, usually by some wretched little copy editor. It's much improved since then. I always get a look at my copyedited manuscripts. I've usually had excellent copy editors.

Who influenced your work?

It's hard to say. I won't finesse this. A lot of writers are a major influence. I have this feeling, it doesn't include writers I admire the most. Some are just so different. For example, I wish I could really get inside the heads of characters like Karel Capek did, but I can't, so he hasn't influenced me that directly. On the other hand, say, Kipling and I... I don't pretend to play in his league, but we're in the same ballpark, and I've learned a lot from him. With that qualification, there were the King James Bible, Shakespeare, and the Icelandic sagas. There are the great tragedians, and so on. And in more modern times, I mentioned Kipling, Conrad, Mark Twain, and in science fiction, the giants of the golden age, starting with Robert Heinlein and Hal Clement. He was the guy who really opened my eyes to the possibilities in hard science.



We met Hal Clement at JohnCon, in Baltimore, about a week ago, and he's still going strong.

Yes, we saw him last year. He still is an influence.

*When I read **HROLF KRAKI'S SAGA**, what intrigued me about the story was that it seemed to be two books in one. The first part was a non-fantasy historical novel, and then the second half suddenly shifts into a sort of fantasy novel and starts to include fantasy elements. Was it planned that way, or did it sort of write itself that way?*

As it says in the author's note, it was essentially a redaction of one of the Icelandic sagas, retold for the modern reader, and those are the events as related in the order, and so on, as you find them in the original.

When I read it I noticed it was very complex. I've read some original Icelandic sagas, and find that the names are either unpronounceable or so similar they're hard to tell apart. Did you have to change any of the names?

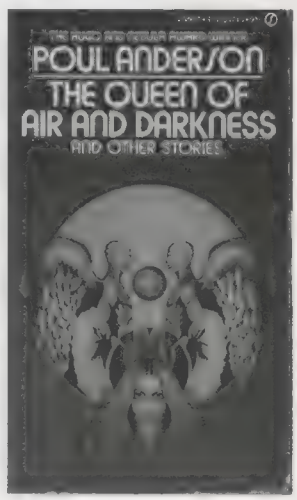
No. I didn't feel free to do that. I just tried to write so as to minimize the chance of confusion. But it's true, about the confusion. I tried to get Karen to read some of the sagas so she could share my pleasure, but she couldn't get into it, complaining that all of the characters were named Thor-something. Names were a minor problem, although I tried to stay close.

*I just finished re-reading C.J. Cherryh's latest book, **INVADER**, and at first I thought the background had a strong Oriental flavor, but in an interview she said it was loosely based on Icelandic custom and lawsuits. For example it was a culture of arranged raids, and you could also buy or sell a bloodfeud, rather like selling or buying accounts receivable or a lawsuit these days. You could find a tough warrior and sell him your feud, rather like a collection agency today, and let him worry about it. Does this pop up in your work? Do you use that much detail from Icelandic sagas as basis for your work?*

Usually not, *per se*. I'm interested; I try not to be obsessive. I'm going to borrow from other cultures — whatever one seems to fit the story best. It might be Japanese or Polynesian, American Indian, whatever.

*REH: One of my favorite of your novels was **THE HIGH CRUSADE**, which I consider to have had a lot to do with the early popularity of the Society for Creative Anachronism.*

Oh, I don't know. I think the SCA sort of happened spontaneously. In fact, I was there at the beginning. Basically, some people just decided it would be fun to have a tourney. So we had one in Diana Paxson's backyard. It was supposed to be a one-shot, but people liked it, and decided to do it again.



REH: I recall you fought as Sir Bela of Eastmark, and your Lady crafted and gave to me a fibula made of silver wire.

*RSR: **THE HIGH CRUSADE** is a science fiction novel, but it includes elements of the Middle Ages, of medieval times. You were one of the first successful science fiction writers to include that sort of thing in your writing. Was there a particular reason why you chose it, or did it just happen?*

I just liked the idea, a sort of a

reversal of **A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT**. I thought I could have a lot of fun with the idea.

REH: You and Karen have traveled all over the world, doing research — Europe, and Ireland, and Scandinavia..

Not really, there's all sorts of places we haven't been. We haven't been to Ireland. We'd like to go sometime. There are a score of other places I'd like to go to.

I notice many writers using Japan lately as source of myth. And a lot of it is similar to the Scandinavian sources.

There are certain, at least superficial, similarities between the Icelandic Republic and Japan in the anarchic period of the Samurai. They evolved similarly. And there are a lot of differences also. But the Japanese culture was much more highly developed and sophisticated. But with very similar concepts of, say, honor and revenge.

[Karen Anderson comes in.]

Do you have anyone who reads and criticizes your work in progress? If so, is this constructive?

Right there. [Poul nods at Karen.] She's my resident nit-picker. She's caught me out in a lot of things. We usually talk a thing out in considerable detail.

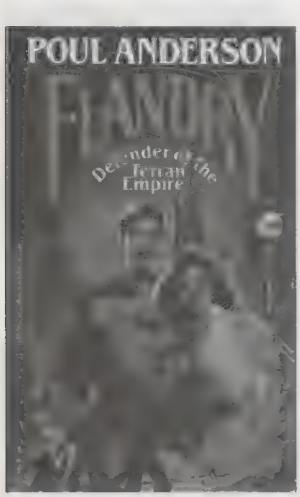
REH: One of the series I've enjoyed was the Nicholas Van Rijn stories. Is that the right pronunciation?

It's more Van RYNE, actually. The only people who can pronounce Dutch properly are either the Dutch themselves, or people with bad colds.

I have the same feeling with Portuguese.

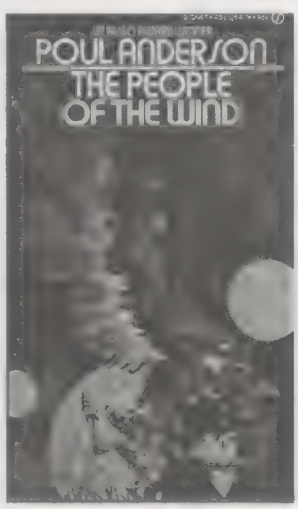
Nick Van Rijn and Dominick Flandry are two of your best known characters. Can you tell us about them?

Flandry came first. Way back when, I wrote several stories for a magazine called *Planet Stories* — which tended to go in for thud and blunder sorts of stories, although they did run experimental stories by the likes of Ray Bradbury and William Tenn and so on that nobody else dared touch. Anyway, it was kind of fun to do. I got tired of those uniformly noble and perfect Nordic heroes, with neat resolutions to all problems and so on, so I set up Flandry as an antihero and did a couple of stories. And then years and years went by, and I revived him in what I hope was a more mature vein. I thought of Nick Van Rijn as another antihero — originally as some one to give some color to a short story that otherwise would have been just a science-fiction-problem sort of story. And then he could be used in other things. He was to a considerable extent modeled on the people of the Hanseatic league and the Renaissance.



REH: I liked it that his motives were not solely noble, like to gain knowledge and explore. He wanted to make good hard cash, and spend it on the good life. I liked that the spaceship was named for Miriam Knight and was described as built for speed and not for comfort. When you named the ship after her, she was several months pregnant.

I didn't know that at the time. Miriam did us once a small favor, and I asked her what I could do in return and she said, "Name a spaceship after me."



REH: Ever since, I've wanted a spaceship named after me. Eventually Ellen Guon did. They named the first nuclear submarine after Jules Verne's Nautilus. So when we really go out in spaceships, they'll be named after ships in science fiction books.

Very possible.

What was the first Nick Van Rijn story?

"Margin of Profit", I think. And then the novel **THE MAN WHO COUNTS**. It was planned as a Hal Clement type of weird-planet novel.

*REH: **THREE HEARTS AND THREE LIONS** is one of your better-known early fantasy stories. And it had a ballad to go along with it. Did you write the ballad?*

Oh no, the ballad was by Randall Garrett. He was doing such things for a lot of different stories.

***THREE HEARTS AND THREE LIONS** seemed rather like a parody. Was it?*

THREE HEARTS AND THREE LIONS was in the *Unknown Worlds* tradition. All of us aficionados really missed it, and decided to go in that tradition.

*Your best known fantasy works are **THREE HEARTS AND THREE LIONS, THE BROKEN SWORD, HROLF KRAKI'S SAGA**...*

There've been some others. **THE MERMAN'S CHILDREN**, which takes off from a Danish legend, and **A MIDSUMMER TEMPEST** which is set in a fantasy world where Shakespeare's plays are literal truth, and the characters speak in blank verse. And there was **OPERATION CHAOS**, which is set in a universe rather like our own, except that magic works. It's been done a lot since. Robert Heinlein and Randall Garrett did it well. I postulated that the discovery was made around 1900 or so, and it's just another sort of technology.

Do you work from an outline? Or just sit at the typewriter and go for it?

I plan things. I found that otherwise too many things went to pieces after a while, and I had to throw it out. I would have done better to go fishing.

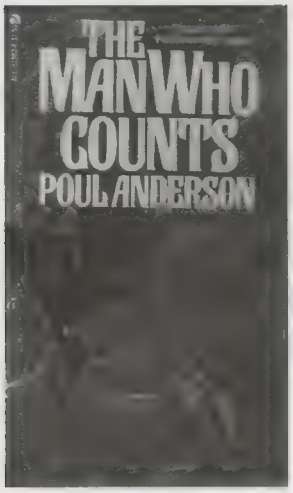
Do you find it difficult?

No. Basically, the outline for me is usually very sketchy. It's a sort of guideline. A story is going to go from here to there, and as often as not characters will get the bit between their teeth, or I'll realize that something I thought would work won't.

I have one of your mysteries, given to me as a birthday present, about a missing Japanese sword.

Yes. I've done a few mysteries, juveniles, straight history, and so on. I'm currently doing a fantasy novel again, on spec, as well as a science fiction, also on spec. In theory I do fantasy in the morning and sit down and do calculations in the afternoon. But that doesn't seem to be working out too well.

REH: For most writers a half day's writing is a full day's work.



RSR: In a series or trilogy, how much effort do you put into making sure that you don't contradict an earlier book?

I know some authors don't worry about it much, while others make careful notes and follow them. I put a lot of effort in to make it all mesh. For my future history stories, about the Polesotechnic League and the Empire stories with Flandry, I accumulated notes that filled a large loose-leaf binder to overflowing. One of the reasons I finally gave up on it was that it was getting harder and harder to make it all fit together. Even so, some eagle-eyed fan caught me in inconsistencies. For which my standard reply came to be that perfect consistency is possible only for God himself, and a close study of scripture shows that not even He gets it right all the time.

Do you have any sort of concordance for your own use?

Well, yes, I mentioned that notebook. That accumulated. And for a story of any length. I work up plot and background, bios of principal characters, histories, etc. I've not yet gone to computer for that. I type mostly. But for dialogue, I jot it down in longhand. Just the physical relaxation of the position makes it easier to write dialogue.

Do you do any writing while you're traveling?

No, it would seem to be a waste of time. I could do other things. No two writers have same working methods.

What is your usual working day?

It varies. When we married, I told Karen that writers are really different people. So if I'm on the couch, I'm working. Her response was, "Okay, until you start snoring." When I get to the actual writing, I work from breakfast to dinner. Still on a typewriter. I do a lot of rewriting in pencil on first draft. Having to get it right makes for discipline.

How did you and Karen meet?

At a convention. About a year before our marriage, we were living far apart. She was in the Washington, D.C. area, I was in Minnesota. We met in Chicago; we now live out west. We moved in 1953. We decided we were we were tired of the cold.

Any other hobbies that feed into your writing?

Reading, traveling, backpacking, sailing, etc. Most of what I know about fencing came from SCA.

REH: Have you received any academic recognition for the research in your novels? Any honorary degrees or such?

No. Though my brother, the college professor, told me after reading one of my books, **THE KING OF YS**, that he's seen PhDs given for less research. On the other hand, we weren't doing it to prove any particular thesis or anything, just trying to get our background straight.

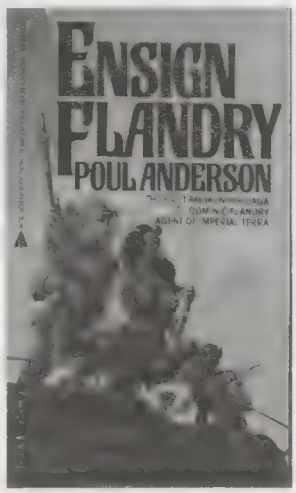
RSR: Any current research in the historical field that helps in your fantasy writing?

Not that I know of. For **THE KING OF YS** we were relying on archeology as well as historical records. Well, for example, recent digs show the Roman legions had a better diet than we thought. They did not really live on a diet of lentils.

RSR: What requires the most research: hard science fiction or fantasy?

Probably the historical human-world type of stuff. It's more complex. Physics lately takes the simplest of subjects, and goes way off.

I was at a conference a while back and someone said, "If you think you understand it, you're wrong. If you do understand it, you're crazy." I've read **A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME**, of course. I'm impressed with Stephen Hawking's work. Freeman Dyson is one of the most brilliant minds around these days, a very nice guy. Science fiction writers steal from him wholesale. Robert Forward has some interesting ideas he doesn't choose to use in his own fiction, which we all take off from. One reads the scientific journals and so on. I subscribe to quite a few: *Science, Scientific American, Sky and Telescope*. I browse at the U.C. Berkeley library. Dr. Cramer, also. I haven't heard him lecture. I follow his not-too-technical writings. One time he took us and few friends through his lab.



Have you ever had a supposition be confirmed by later discoveries?

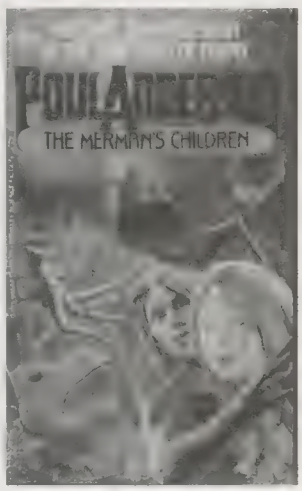
A couple of coincidences, in a way. A long time ago I wrote a story about how planets could be around a neutron star. At that time it didn't seem possible. A recent discovery shows at least one pulsar has a couple of planets. Frank Tipper wrote to the scientific magazine suggesting that these planetary types should be called Poulsars. **THE ENEMY STARS** was the story.

It seems that people are accepting more far-out material than ever before. Not just in science fiction but in mainstream media. For example, ***THE X-FILES****.*

The story market now is more accepting of far-out stuff. Mainstream is a snobbish idea, a recent idea. Of course we have to meet challenges outside the ghetto that we were insulated from before. Speaking for myself, **VAULT OF A MILLION YEARS** is science-fiction that stuck close to history. Reviewed well.

Any advice for new writers?

That reminds me of Sterling Lanier, working for Chilton. He was fired because he'd bought a huge novel, **DUNE**, by a completely unknown writer, Frank Herbert. He moved to Florida, settled in Sarasota, met John D. MacDonald. They went to a mystery writer's meeting. On the way over, MacDonald said, "What do you do?" Sterling said, "I was an editor." MacDonald was silent for a while, then said, "Can I tell them you were a pimp?"



As for young writers breaking in, it's a tough row to hoe. Harder than ever for writers of books. For those that will make it: do your own thing, what you can do best, and don't be easily discouraged.

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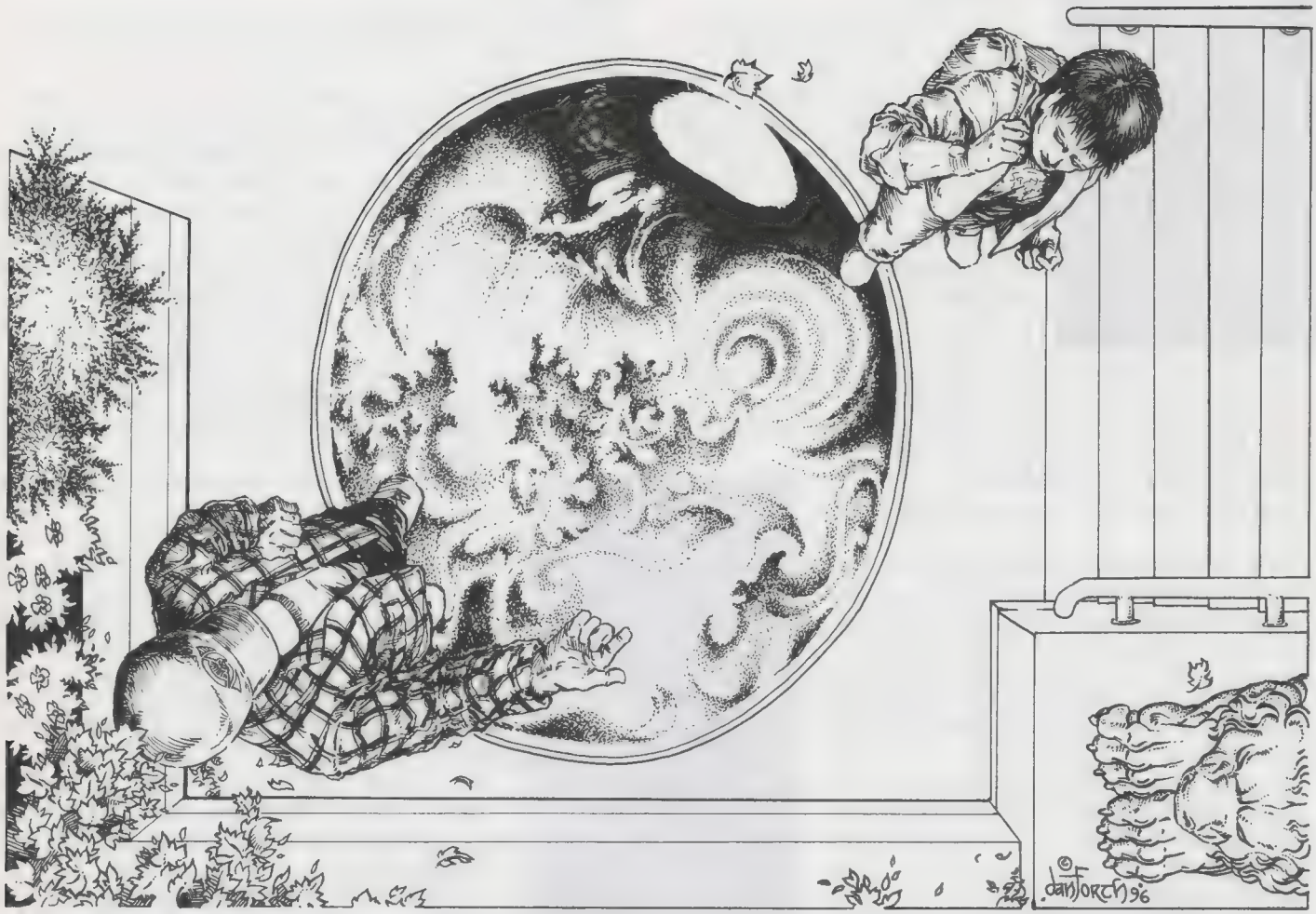


Artwork by Elizabeth Danforth

A Gate to Elsewhere

by M. Thérèse Cioppa

It was the old man again, the one with the tattered plaid coat and green baseball cap. The first time he had approached, Cassie had seen him coming out of the corner of her eye and walked away, faster than he could follow. That had been three days ago, and since then it had seemed that everywhere she was, he appeared. It was not that she didn't want to help, but her stipend barely stretched to provide for her own needs; charity was a luxury she couldn't afford. This time, she didn't see the old man until he was right in front of her.

"Spare a quarter for coffee, ma'am?" Cassie could barely hear him over the sounds of the crowds and wind and machines. She started to shake her head and walk by without a pause, but then she noticed his hands: red and chapped from the cold. His knobby knuckles reminded her of her grandfather's hands, crippled by arthritis. She dug into her coat pocket, searching for the change that was to have been her coffee money - two quarters and a dime. Her hand found four round shapes instead of the three that she had put there before leaving for the lab. She pulled the coins out and looked at them. The fourth shape was not a coin, but the disc of agate she had cut the week before. She had cut and polished it because it reminded her of a lake she had seen as a child - only the colors were shades of brown and cream, rather than the blues and greens of her memories. She dropped the coins into the old man's cup, and turned away.

"Wait!" The fierce whisper came from behind her. Startled, she turned back. "Let me see what you have!"

Cassie realized she was still holding the slice of agate and closed her fingers tightly around the rock. "It's only a

piece of rock," she said. "Nothing special."

"Hold out your hand and let me see!" he whispered urgently.

Apprehensively, Cassie uncurled her fingers from the agate and held it out to him. He snatched it from her and looked at it closely, turning it over in his hands as she had done when she first saw the rock from which the slice of agate had been cut. The shifting shades of brown and cream and red seemed to fascinate him as they had her.

"Where did you get this?" he asked sharply. He seemed almost a different person than he had a minute ago, shedding the slump and whining voice of the old man with an actor's ease.

"It's part of a rock I collected."

"Where, *exactly*, did you collect it then?" The question was impatient, and Cassie shifted uneasily.

"My field area is in New Mexico, so I must have gotten it there. But I can't remember where I found it. I must have collected it—it was in one of my sample boxes that arrived last week, but... I just don't remember." She shrugged, still confused at finding the rock in her carefully labeled and sealed boxes of samples.

"Ahhhh!" The man's sigh seemed almost satisfied, as if she had just answered a riddle correctly. With almost a bow, he returned the agate slice to her still outstretched hand, and made a curious gesture, almost a wave, over her hand and the agate. For just a second, she could feel a peculiar warmth emanating from the rock. Glancing down, she could see no difference. When she looked back up, the old man was gone. Cassie dismissed the encounter from her mind and, dropping the agate into the pocket of her jeans, continued toward the geology building.

Cassie opened the door to her small, cramped office, and looked around with a feeling of satisfaction. Although the small office was windowless, and tucked away on the top floor of the building, distant from all the classrooms and working space, it was hers alone. None of the other grads had wanted it; they fought over the bigger, windowed offices on the lower floors, and ended up crammed two and three to a room. She set her knapsack on top of the desk, picked up her coffee mug and left, closing the door behind her. The department coffeepot was in the common room next to the main office - she could check her mail as well. The thought of the department coffee made her grimace, but having given away the money she would have used to buy coffee on her way, she had no choice. She ran down the two flights of stairs, and headed for the coffeepot.

The actual taste of the coffee was worse than the thought had been. Cassie made a face at the cup, as she carried it through the main office, heading towards the small alcove containing the mailboxes. Her mailbox contained only a single slip of paper. *Please see Dr. Lancaster at 2:30 p.m. J. Jefreys.* Cassie turned and raised an eyebrow at Jane, the departmental secretary, who was on the phone. Jane shrugged, mouthing the words *"No idea."* at her. Putting the puzzling note into her pocket, Cassie headed down the hallway to the mineralogy lab to check her preparations for the next day. Several possible reasons for the requested meeting circled through her head - not all of them good.

She flipped on the lights as she entered the lab, and looked around. All the microscopes had been put away, but somebody had left a couple of hand samples out on one of the tables. Cassie put down her coffee cup, and walked over to put them away, shoving her hands into her jeans pockets in her usual gesture. She felt a small round shape in her right pocket, and pulled it out, looking at the agate slice again. She picked up a sample in each hand.

The world was water, all the shades of blue and green. Cassie drew a quick breath, but felt nothing unusual... the surrounding liquid could not reach her. Above her, the colors grew lighter, as if towards a light source, and below they grew darker, more intense. As she turned slowly, she saw a huge mass to her left. As she moved toward it, the form came into focus. Her eyes opened wide. It was a reef, but not like the ones she knew, not the familiar forms of the hexacorals: Diploria, Montastrea, Meandrina. The organisms were different, and as Cassie moved closer, she recognized the forms of Favosites, Halysites, Hallopera... all parts of a reef ecosystem that had died out hundreds of millions of years ago. A movement caught her attention - she saw a small insect-like creature. With a thrill of delight, Cassie recognized a trilobite, although she couldn't name it.

Cassie gave a small gasp of amazement and dropped all the rocks on the table top. She stared at them. She had no idea what had just happened. Tentatively, she picked up the hand samples and looked at the label: *Fossiliferous Limestone (Scotland)* and *Scoria (Iceland)*. She had held the limestone in the same hand as the agate slice. On a sudden thought, she picked up the agate slice and the scoria sample and touched them together.

The world was painted in shades of red and black and fire. Cassie looked up into a sky that seemed to have moving, glowing filaments strung across it, arcs of fire falling to the ground in all directions. A bright red chunk of rock fell at her feet. As the edges turned black, the heart of the chunk stayed burning red, cooling slowly through shades of crimson and vermilion. Cassie looked toward the volcano and saw a wave of glowing red-hot lava and debris rolling toward her....

Unnerved by the scene, Cassie dropped the rocks on the table and backed away. The agate slice seemed to be a catalyst for the scenes. Suddenly, she recalled the warmth she had felt when the old man had handed the agate back to her. Quickly, she put the samples back in their cabinets, and left the lab.

She headed back down the street and found the old man on the same corner where she had first seen him, huddled in his ragged coat. "You seemed to recognize this rock when you saw it, she said, holding out the agate slice. "When I touched it to some of my rocks... it... well, it seemed to show me what they were, and how they were formed. What *is* it?"

"It is the essence stone." The old man looked up at her calmly, as if he had been sitting there waiting for her question.

"Why do I have it?"

"I do not know why you, personally, have the stone," the old man replied. "It chooses its own bearer. I have been searching for it and its bearer for several years, as I have need of them. The stone can be used to look into objects, as you have seen. It can also be used to look into a person's mind, or essence, or soul, however you might term it. The bearer thus has the ability to establish the true identity of anyone; and it is this ability that I need."

Cassie's eyebrows lifted higher and higher as she listened. When he finished, she looked at him with skepticism.

"You're joking, right?" She started to turn and walk away.

"No, wait!" the old man cried, stand-

ing up and grabbing her hand, the one that held the stone. He placed his palm atop hers, the stone sandwiched between them.

It was like a river: fragments of memory and emotions flowing past and through her. She was a child, watching a friend jump into a pond; watching a man hit a woman and send her crashing into the wall; feeling a sword in his hand; feeling a rush of excitement as he ran towards the thicket of trees where Katherine had said she'd be waiting... and later, as a man, watching as Katherine strode away from him, dying inside with grief as he was unable to say anything to bring her back; feeling pain in his wounded arm, and bitterness because he could not return to the battle that had been his only life since Katherine had gone... and still later, watching the fair-haired young boy who was his charge struggling to swing the sword that was his heritage, and for the first time in years feeling a stir of emotion; watching as that young boy grew older; feeling his despair when the fair-haired boy disappeared, his desperate search for a wizard who would teach him what he needed to know....

Cassie backed away from the old man, staring at him in shock. She could feel a warmth emanating from the agate still clutched in her hand, a warmth similar to that she had felt the first time the old man had touched the stone. She could still recall the flashes of the old man's life flowing through her.

"Why do you need the stone? And why can't you use it?" she asked.

"The prince of our land was stolen away almost fifteen years ago, and no one knew where he was taken. I... we searched the kingdoms for the next ten years, with no sign of him. Ten days ago, one of our seers prophesied that he would return on the fifteenth day of the tenth moon; that was almost a week ago."

"And did he?" Cassie asked.

"We're not sure," the old man admitted. "Three unknown princes came through the gates that day - we don't know which one is our true prince."

"So you need some way of identifying the real prince. And the stone is the only way?" Cassie asked.

"The only way that I have been able to find. The stone chooses its own bearer. I tracked the stone here and found it, and you...." He shrugged, lifting one hand in a gesture of helplessness. "So... will you come?"

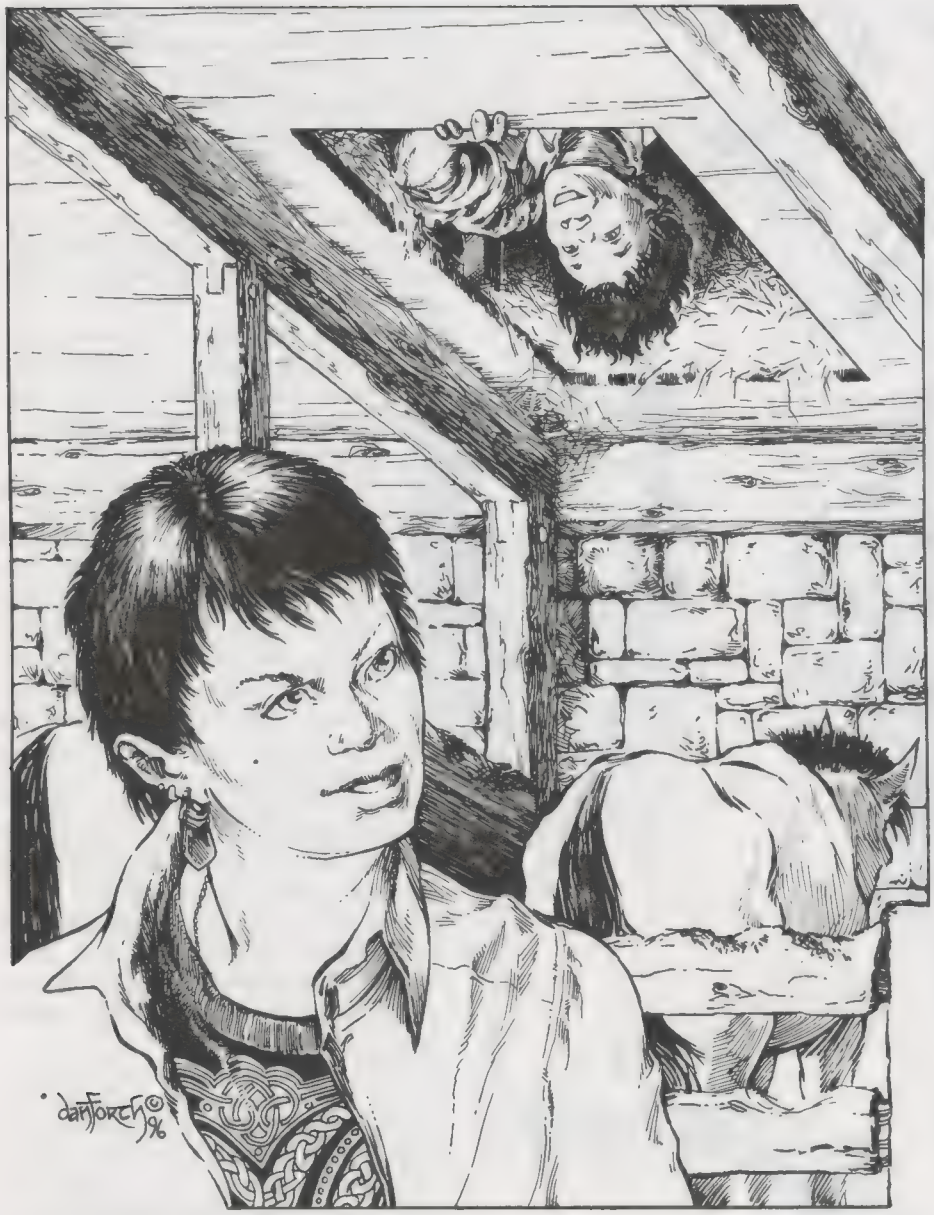
Cassie thought about it. She wasn't sure she believed what the old man was saying, but the thought of escaping from the cold, windblown city, and the tedium of teaching laboratories made her want to go. As she pushed her hands into her pockets, and felt the rustle of paper - the note from the graduate advisor - she thought of all the possible reasons for the meeting. Making up her mind suddenly, she turned to the old man.

"All right, I'll come," she said. Half to herself, she added, "Maybe I can think of some way to get Lancaster off my back."

Tension drained from the old man, and his face lit up. He stood in front of her and touched her forehead. Colors swirled in her eyes, first veiling and then completely obscuring the city around them. Cassie found her eyes closing, and then a sharp jerk made her open them again. What she saw next almost made her close them again in disbelief - it was a very noisy medieval castle courtyard filled with people. She saw three young men across the yard - one in green, one in blue, and one in red. As the people noticed their arrival, the noise crescendoed, and Cassie and the old man were surrounded.

That night, Cassie slipped away to be on her own. The castle was all abustle with preparations for the coronation the next day. In the gaming houses of the city, bets were being taken on which prince was *their* prince; so far the odds were on the green prince. Seeking a quiet corner where she could think, Cassie headed for the stables. There, no one seemed to be around; the horses had all been settled in for the night and

Artwork by Elizabeth Danforth



their tenders had left. In a corner of the tack room, Cassie closed her eyes... and heard a small sound from above her. She tilted up her head. A square opening in the ceiling, framed a tanned face capped by brown hair. It was a strong face, but the prominent bones were softened by the hint of laughter in the eyes and mouth.

"Hi," she said to the face.

The face disappeared, and a young man swung himself through the trapdoor into the tack room. He bowed to her, and she noticed that he was dressed in the red prince's livery.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm the red prince's stable boy," he answered. "Beyond that, I do not know."

"How can you not know?"

"I do not remember my name, or much beyond the ride here," the stable boy said.

Cassie looked at him consideringly, "Well, you seem to be very calm about it. Don't you *want* to know who you are?"

He sobered, the glint of laughter disappearing. "Of course I do! And I will, after my prince is crowned. I am bound to him until that time."

"Your prince? Do you mean the red prince?"

The stableboy thought about that for several moments. "Well, no... not necessarily. I think it is to the land that I am bound... when the true prince is crowned, then I will be free."

"What do you remember?" asked Cassie curiously.

"Very little, actually." he replied. "It's more that certain people, certain places, are familiar." He waved a hand at the surrounding castle. "This I do not remember, but I remember the city walls, and the forest we rode through. The old man who brought you here reminds me of someone, but I do not know whom. That is why I think I am bound to the land and the true prince." He shrugged. "I will find out who and what I am, eventually," he said determinedly.

Cassie turned at the sound of voices behind her. The old man came around a corner into the stable with the blue prince. The old man had been having private conversations with each of the three princes all day: trying to break the spell, to feel a glimmer of recognition for the young boy he had taught. When Cassie turned back to the stableboy, he was gone. Looking up, she caught a flash of movement in the trapdoor, just before it was gently closed. The old man saw Cassie, and came towards her.

"You must rest before Court tomorrow," he chided and guided her back to the castle.

The next day, as the tower bell rang the noon hour, Cassie stood next to the old man in the Great Hall, surrounded by courtiers dressed in their finest attire. Her clothing was stark in comparison: deep brown with only a hint of raspberry trim. The three young princes faced her: a triptych of splendor in peacock colors of blue, green, and red. Cassie was struck by their similarity, not only of face and feature, but of poise and posture. All three resembled the fair-haired boy she had seen in the old man's memories.

She turned to the one on her left, he who wore blue, and held out her hand, the agate slice resting on it. With no hesitation the first prince lifted his hand to cover hers.

Memories of fighting as a child against a slender brown-haired man with only one eye; reading in a big book-filled library; of struggling to remember names and faces that passed him in a dazzling array; of a sweet-faced lady who kissed him; of a tall stern figure wearing a crown; of darkness and the withered face of a crone who laughed over him; of sleeping for what seemed liked forever; of riding home with two others at his side...

Cassie dropped her hand from his, and faced the green prince, holding her hand out again. He lifted his...

Sitting on a throne in his father's arms; a fighting yard, facing a tall black-haired

Artwork by Elizabeth Danforth

man who lifted the sword over his head with both arms; escaping from the castle by himself to see the surrounding city; kissing a girl dressed in green and silver; of a laughing crone; of riding towards home with two others...

With growing puzzlement, Cassie moved to face the third prince, the one in red. He extended his hand toward her, and she slowly brought hers to touch his.

Being a child sent to his lavish room for laughing in court; fighting in the yards against a short, stumpy, red-haired man; walking behind a funeral, dressed in black and trying desperately to keep from crying; holding a ring towards a tall, red-haired girl with a face like a candle; riding through a dark woods and falling; of an old woman who laughed; of riding home in the company of two others...

Cassie turned to face the old man.

"Well?" he demanded. "Which one is the true prince?"

"They are all true princes," Cassie replied, her face showing puzzlement. "It's just that I don't think any of them are your prince."

"Why not?" the old man asked.

"I... I'm not sure. Their memories are all of being princes, but..." Cassie's mind clicked through the images she had seen; the kings and queens, the palaces, the old crone, the fighting... the fighting in the yards!

Turning abruptly, Cassie ran towards the open doors at the end of the hall, She slipped passed the guards and dashed through the courtyard towards the stables. She looked about her for a familiar brown head, and saw it in one of the horse stalls. She halted in front of the red prince's brown-haired stableboy and held out her hand, the one with the agate in it.

"Hold out your hand!" she demanded.

"But, lady..." The stable boy looked down at his hands, covered with dirt and straw, and pointedly glanced at her court dress.

"I don't care! Hold out your hand!" Reluctantly the stable boy placed his hand on top of hers, his eyes wide with a mixture of apprehension and hope.

Memories of a solitary child, left alone by his distant parents; of a older, sad-faced man with one crippled arm who had taught him how to use a sword; of talking long into the night of the world and of battles with the same man; of learning woodcraft; of hearing his teacher cry out 'Katherine' in his sleep one night; of hearing (but not seeing) cruel laughter; of stables; of a red prince; of riding, he knew not where; of half-recognizing people and places; of a brown-haired girl with green eyes...

Cassie pulled away, and turned to face those that had followed her into the stables: the old man, the three princes, and many of the courtiers. She gestured to the brown-haired stable boy.

"Here is *your* true prince. While these others," her hand sweep included the red, green, and blue princes, "are all true princes and would have served you well, they are not your prince. They come from other lands, other times.... If there is some way I could send you home I would," Cassie said to the three princes, "as I have felt your wish to go, but...."

The old man smiled and said, "This much I can do." He stepped forward and gently touched the three princes one by one on the forehead. As he did, each faded and disappeared. Only Cassie, who was looking at the red prince as this happened, saw the look of joy on his face the instant before he disappeared, just as only she saw the dreamlike images of another time, another place, another court, as the red prince appeared in their midst. The old man turned to Cassie.

"You must return to your own place as well. If you can find the way, we will welcome your return." As he touched Cassie's forehead, she felt her eyes clos-

Artwork by Elizabeth Danforth

ing, and the world spun away in a swirl of red and brown and cream. With a wrench, it righted itself, and she opened her eyes again.

Cassie was standing on the street corner where she had found the old man. She looked at herself in the window of the shop. She was dressed in her familiar jeans and jacket. She looked at her watch to check the date and time, and gasped. It was 2:20, and she had a meeting with the graduate advisor in ten minutes! Shoving her hands deep into her coat pockets as she made a dash for the building, she felt a familiar small round shape under her fingers, and smiled.

❄

M. Thérèse Cioppa: I was born in Alaska twenty-seven years ago; the second of seven children. As a child, I lived in various parts of the USA. and Canada (Massachusetts, British Columbia, New Hampshire, Ontario). We finally settled in Ottawa (Ontario, Canada) when I was about fifteen. After briefly considering a career as a musician, I studied geology at Carleton University, did a M.Sc. in Earth and Ocean Sciences at the University of Victoria (British Columbia) and am presently a doctoral candidate in Earth and Environmental Sciences at Lehigh University (Pennsylvania). My interests include music, calligraphy, computers, and (of course) books. I read almost anything I can get; mysteries, suspense, history, science fiction and fantasy. Some of my favorite authors include Anne Perry, Lindsey Davis, Judith Tarr, Robin Mckinley, and Dick Francis. The idea for this story came from a 'double-entendre' session that I remember from my days as an undergraduate in geology; looking for geologic terms that could be used in non-geologic (mostly rude) ways. It is my first published story.

Elisabeth Danforth began her art career doing sketches for fantasy role-playing games, little suspecting that it would land her a job as art director for Flying Buffalo Inc., publisher of Tunnels & Trolls. After seven years with Flying Buffalo, she began working as a freelancer. Her work appears in products from numerous companies, notably Wizards of the Coast, Iron Crown Enterprises, FASA, TSR, Daedalus, and Interplay.

The Results of the Cauldron

Maybe it was the approach of winter, or the start of the school year... in any case, when we last went to press, we hadn't received very many votes for your favorites in issue #29. So we held the results until this issue, and sure enough, we received lots of ballots in January. So here are the results for both issue #29 and issue #30.

Issue 29

Stories:

- **1st Place:** "Caitlin's Magic" by Jackie Shank
- **2nd Place:** "Humphrey's Dilemma" by Cynthia McQuillin
- **3rd Place:** "Chastity" by Susan Jones

Artwork:

- **1st Place:** Lori Deitrick for "Caitlin's Magic"
- **2nd Place:** Alicia Austin for "Humphrey's Dilemma"
- **3rd Place:** Allison Fiona Hershey for "The Cats of Time"

Issue 30

Stories:

- **1st Place:** "Fatherhood" by Steven Piziks
- **2nd Place:** "A Prince Among Frogs" by Elisabeth Waters
- **3rd Place:** "Sparrow's Song" by Huan-Hua Chye

Artwork:

- **1st Place:** Alan Gutierrez for "A Suitable Suitor"
- **2nd Place:** Jonathan Hunt for "A Prince Among Frogs"
- **3rd Place:** Armand Cabrera for "La Donna Triste"

Congratulations to all the winners! To vote for your favorites in *this* issue, use the ballot on page 64. Your interest and enthusiasm mean a lot to us at *FANTASY* Magazine.

DEMONHEART

by Jon Hansen

Faren lay on a gray stone slab. Around him stretched only darkness, water dripping the only sound echoing in the distance. The chill of the cold stone seeped through his thin clothing, numbing him. He opened his mouth to scream for help, but felt himself choking on the words, his mouth full of dust and sand. His body lurched with a sudden sharp pain. He heard the sound of cloth tearing and looked down to see a gnarled hand rip its way out of his chest, grasping and pawing. He screamed ....

And awoke, the scream dying in his throat when he realized where he was, safe in the hold of the *Eye of Heaven*. Around him came the snores of the rest of the crew, scattered bundles in the dimness. He lay there for a long moment, calming himself, listening to the rhythms of the sleeping ship. He had had the same dream every night, ever since the sorceress Ylana had come aboard. He thought of her and how she might help him. After a moment he silently slipped from his blankets and left the hold, towards the captain's cabin, where the sorceress was.

Ylana had come aboard at Imphal a week ago, after counting enough foreign gold into the captain's trembling hand to buy the ship outright. She had said only that she was traveling to Golgamoth, two weeks' journey on horseback, but just a week away across the Sheim Sea. She said nothing about her business there. Jericho, the first mate, had loudly protested her boarding, saying the crew would never stand for it. The captain kept quiet, counting his coins, and Ylana had merely gazed at the mate for an eternal moment until Jericho at last retreated, grumbling into his beard.

It was a short walk across the ship. The *Eye of Heaven* was not a particularly large merchant ship, but it was a well kept one. Faren easily avoided the lazy eye of the night watch, and then he stood before *her* door. There was no guard; there was no need. No one would dare disturb *her*.

The sorceress had taken over the captain's cabin after coming aboard, and had not set foot from it since they had set sail. Any complaints the captain may have had were smoothed over with more gold. Her baggage had been light, only a small pack. Faren had been a little disappointed, expecting the sorts of exotic and mysterious things that the village witch back home had used for her spells. She had also carried a long broadsword at her hip. Some of the northern men in the crew muttered at that, but she had taken no notice and no one dared press the point.

Jericho will tan my hide if he catches me, Faren thought. The mate had filled Faren with a tale that set the boy's hair on end, of how Ylana had gained her powers by a pact of darkness, and he had told Faren to avoid her at all cost. He had glowered at Faren until the boy mumbled an agreement to keep his distance. Now Faren hesitated in front of the door. Inside he could hear a quiet sound, like music. After a moment he seized his courage and rapped twice.

The sound inside stopped for a moment, and Faren could hear someone moving inside. He reached for the handle, but the door opened silently before he touched it. "Enter," came a quiet voice from inside.

The cabin was completely dark. Two open portholes in the back wall brought the smell of salt and fish into the cabin. The moonlight gave the small room an unearthly glow. Faren had been in the captain's cabin only once before, when he first signed onto the crew. Faren had

been a little scared, then. Now he trembled as he looked around.

The music was much louder now, the sound of a woman humming a lullaby to herself. For a moment Faren couldn't see anyone. *Perhaps she's invisible!* He looked about a bit wildly. "Hello?" he said. "Is there anyone here?"

Something to his left shifted and he whirled. A woman, formless in black robes, sat in the corner, her pale face now uncovered and shining like the moonlight. "What do you want?" Her voice was low, flowing through the cabin. For a moment Faren thought she sounded like his mother, sad and quiet.

"My name is Faren," he blurted. "I want to be a sorcerer." She said nothing, her colorless eyes staring right through him. "Will you take me to apprentice?"

She laughed, not unkindly. "Child, go away. You don't know what you're asking." Faren felt his ears burning, but he didn't move. She sat forward, looking at him with new interest. "Why should I? Why do you want to become a sorcerer?"

He paused, for a moment. The need had been so deep inside him for so long that he had to think before he could say it. "I want to be a hero. My uncle Garon was a soldier in the Steel Legion. He visited us a few times, and told me how they helped defeat the Bone Empire. I told my father one day that I wanted to grow and be just like Garon." Faren flushed a little at the memory of his father's expression.

"My father laughed. He said he was a fisherman, and he wanted me to become a fisherman too. I didn't want to. I wanted to be like Garon. So I ran away to Imphal. I tried to join the militia there, but they laughed at me too. Said I should come back when I was older. Finally Jericho agreed to take me on. But I don't want to be a merchant." Faren looked down at his feet, a little embarrassed, then looked back at her. Through her robes Faren thought for a moment he could almost make out the mark of the sorcerer twisting in silver fire on her chest. Quickly he looked away.

Ylana didn't seem to notice, however. She shook her head. "The price of power is high. You would not want to pay it."

"So what Jericho said about you is true!" Faren was a little shocked. He had thought the mate was just trying to scare him.

"What did he say?"

Faren looked down at his feet again. "That ... you killed your husband, sacrificed him to darkness. That you traded your child's soul for your power. That you cannot die, being cursed by the gods." The boy looked up at her, suddenly afraid. An uncle of his had insulted the village witch once, and had drowned only a week later.

She merely sat, staring back at him, regarding him so frankly that he flushed. "There are many ways to be a hero. Find another one. I do not want another apprentice." She looked away, eyes clouded in memory.

This wasn't how Faren had imagined it would go. "No! You can't!" He took a step forward, insistent.

Again she didn't notice. "Go away, child." She sat back on her stool and began humming again.

Faren was furious. She had dismissed him, just like that! His hopes crumbled and he felt like crying. He turned to leave, tears beginning to well up. He opened the door and then stopped. In a fury he whirled back around and glared at her. "Stay out of my dreams, then! Keep your witchery to yourself!" His voice cracked at the end, high and shaky.

Abruptly the humming stopped. Suddenly she stood before him, her two hands seizing his head in an icy grip, her face only a few inches away, peering deep into his eyes. After a second Faren realized that she wasn't breathing. It was all he could do not to scream. They stood that way for a minute, the sorceress looking for something in his face, the boy too scared to move or

Artwork by Gail Butler

Artwork by Gail Butler

speak.

In a sudden motion she released him. He swayed and almost fell. As he stood there speechless, she reached beneath her robes, removed a curious metal symbol from a small pouch and slipped it on a thin chain. "Here, child. Take this," she said, offering it to him. Her face, a carved ivory mask, shone in the dark.

Faren took it. The metal symbol felt warm, not unpleasantly, and seemed to move under his fingers as he held it in his hand. It curved strangely, like nothing he had ever seen before. "Put it on," said Ylana. Faren looked up at her.

"What will it do?"

"It will give you what you want. It will help make you a hero."

Carefully he pulled the chain over his neck and tucked it under his shirt. Faren could feel it up against his skin, slowly moving across his chest.

"What will it cost me?"

"Only what you have to give." With that she turned away, again quietly humming, and returned to her stool. He began to speak, but she covered her face and he instead left, slipping back across the ship to his waiting blanket.

He crawled back in and lay there for a long time, thinking about what had happened until sleep overcame him, the talisman warm under his shirt.

In the morning they were attacked. Faren had come on deck just minutes before. He looked up to see the pirate corsair appear out of nowhere, rippling out of the dawn like a fever dream, catching everyone completely off guard. Desperately the captain spun the wheel but it was too late. The shock of the collision threw Faren to his knees, and the pirates swarmed aboard, howling with bloodlust.

Now Faren felt the deck shuddering beneath his feet, heard the screams of the crew and knew that it was only a matter of time. The confusion and panic on the merchant was the same as it had been the night his uncle's fishing boat struck a reef and sank. They had been close to land then, and were able to swim to shore. Out here on the open seas there was no safety.

Hearing the rush of feet behind him, he whirled and only barely dodged a cutlass thrust from a wild-eyed ruffian. He swung his knife wildly and felt the thud up his arm as he connected, the talisman suddenly blazing at his throat. The pirate howled in pain and collapsed, his dark blood spilling out and staining the smooth wooden decks. For a moment Faren stood there in shock. It had been so easy, so effortless. After a moment he reached down and pulled his blade free. The pirate's eyes gazed up at him, empty now, and he looked away, sickened.

The rest of the ship was no better. Men struggled and died on the decks. As Faren watched, the captain went down with a bolt in the eye. At the prow stood Ylana, a tall wraith in black, her rune of power glowing like a star on her chest. The remains of the crew rallied around her. They feared and hated her, but she was their only chance to survive.

Beside her stood Jericho, the old mate's cutlass beating back one attacker after another. Ylana's broadsword blazed and flared in the dawn, leaving mangled bodies in its wake. None of the pirates had faced that blade and lived, but still more and more of them swarmed aboard. Faren could see the pirate captain still standing on his own

ship, arms crossed, a lopsided grin on his face.

Faren touched the talisman hanging around his neck. For a moment it felt like a hot coal and he jerked his hand away. Up against his chest it merely felt warm. Another body collapsed on the deck near Faren, one of his crewmates, one eye open in surprise, the other a ruin of blood and bone. Faren clenched his teeth and tried to hold back the bile. His uncle Garon had never mentioned how terrifying a battle was. He had never sounded afraid. Faren couldn't understand why not.

Another scream of pain nearby reminded him that he needed to find safety quickly. He headed across the deck towards Ylana. The stench of blood and salt and fear filled the air and the clash of steel deafened him. As Faren passed the mast another pirate charged out of the crowd and leaped on top of him. Frantically Faren stabbed at him, trying to get away. They rolled to the rail, still struggling. Then the pirate gave a gurgle and died. With an effort Faren pushed away the body, but he could feel a stabbing pain in his side. A touch came away red and sticky. Pale, Faren tried to stand and gasped in shock and pain. The prow and safety were now as distant as the moon. He considered throwing himself over the side and chancing the sharks, but the deck lurched again and he collapsed beside the dead pirate, tears in his eyes, his side aflame.

A sudden silence fell over the doomed vessel. Faren looked around; besides the handful of survivors at the prow, the rest of the *Eye*'s crew was dead or dying. *Including myself,* Faren thought.

"Surrender or die!" yelled one of the pirates. The merchant crew jeered in response, but Ylana was silent, sword at the ready.

"Ylana, you are the only one I really want, you know." The voice drifted across the deck. Faren craned his head back and saw the pirate captain, smiling lazily at the sorceress like a cat stalking a mouse. The captain took two quick steps and leaped over the rail onto the *Eye,* feather-light. Faren thought he looked more like a nobleman's foppish son than a pirate, and he wore no weapon that Faren could see, but the rest of the pirates made way for him quickly enough. Another moment told Faren why: on his tanned and muscular chest burned the same rune as Ylana's, the mark of the demon. There came a mutter from the merchant crew, which edged away from Ylana, shooting her suspicious looks. Faren lay still and played dead.

The pirate captain strolled slowly and easily through the corpses until he stood a few feet beyond where Faren lay dying. He smiled and bowed, the picture of the perfect gentleman. "Ylana. How very pleasant to see you again. And I've been looking for you for some time."

"Darmon. You bastard."

The pirate captain smiled again. "Ah, dear lady. You always did have a way with words." He then inclined his head at Jericho. "Ah, let me be the first to extend you my congratulations on your new promotion, captain, and, on behalf of myself and my men, thank you for the kind hospitality of your ship." He laughed, the rest of the pirates joining in.

Jericho looked at Ylana angrily. "You know him?"

The sorceress did not take her eyes off the smirking pirate as she answered in a voice of dark glass. "This is Darmon. We've met before, a long time ago, under equally unpleasant circumstances."

"At your service, sir!" boomed Darmon, and he gave another courtly bow. As he straightened, one of the surviving crew threw a knife at him. Darmon's smile never faded as the knife sank into his chest with a meaty *chunk.* The crew gasped as he pulled it out and casually tossed it aside, the knife rattling as it clattered on the deck. Darmon chuckled. "Please, my good captain. No need for you to offer us any more gifts! We'll get what we came for soon enough."

"And what would that be?" Faren thought she sounded only a little curious, as if she were inquiring about the weather.

Darmon laughed, a slight edge creeping into it. Casually he pointed at her. "Why, you, dear lady." He laughed again, his voice echoing among the dead. The pirate paused and scratched his head, looking at Ylana. "Why are you protecting these people, Ylana? They hate you, you know. Not as much as I do, of course, but they still hate you." He casually began to pace along the deck, absently stepping over a body here and there. "Oh, certainly, after we have you, my men will throw them overboard, but it's nothing personal. Just business." Jericho's face burned livid with rage, but Ylana simply looked uninterested. Darmon clouded over for

Artwork by Gail Butler

a moment, cold and angry. "You and I, *that* is personal."

"What are you here for, Darmon?" Faren thought Ylana sounded bored.

The well-dressed pirate looked up at the sorceress. "I'm here to kill you, Ylana. I'm here to steal your powers, to rip the demon from your heart and make it serve me. But mostly, I'm here to make you suffer as you've made me suffer."

"It won't work, you know. You'll never be able to control it. You don't have the will."

Darmon flushed. "Don't have the will! Why, my dear Ylana, we'll see about that!"

He began to raise his arms, but one of the pirates stepped forward, head nodding in respect. "Beggin' your pardon, sir, but me 'n some of the men were wantin' to take some o' this ship's cargo before it sinks, sir, if you don't mind."

Darmon turned towards the pirate, face red with rage, fist half-raised. "How dare you interrupt —" With an effort he stopped and straightened, mastering himself. "Very well, then. Do as you wish, simply make it quick." The pirate scuttled off, gathering a few of his fellows and heading below.

Jericho snarled in outrage. "You thieving swine! Don't you dare —" Darmon cut him off with a lazy wave of his hand.

"My dear ... captain, you are in no position to demand anything. I myself am not interested in whatever paltry cargo you happen to be carrying, but my men are. As I have said, the only thing I want is Ylana's." His eyes gleamed as he smiled at Ylana.

"You can try to take it."

"I intend to. Step forward, my dear, and face me, unless you are afraid."

Ylana did not bother to respond, stepping away from Jericho and the others, her long black cloak flowing in the breeze. Darmon stepped forward to meet her. They stood for a long time, simply staring at each other like two hunting cats. No one else moved.

Suddenly the two of them were wrapped in a gauzy light that wavered and danced like the lights in the northern skies. It hurt Faren's eyes to look at it, and he squinted in the sudden glare. Everyone else quickly backed away from the two. A humming noise seemed to be coming from the light, gnawing at Faren's ears. It sounded like voices, whispering to him from very far away. He was afraid to listen to it. The wind died, everything became still, and even the ship seemed to pause in its dying.

Then it began. Ylana gave a shout and raised her arms, chanting words that had no meaning to Faren. A dark cloud formed before her. Out of it stepped a thing that was a man and not a man. It drooled and snarled at Darmon and shuffled forward, clutching a long heavy axe.

But Darmon began his own chant, and a three-headed dragon-thing formed, hissing and spitting dark venom. Faren gasped at the smell of the thing. Then the monster shrieked and charged Ylana's creation.

The two shapes clashed and began to struggle. The man-thing swung his axe, severing one of the dragon's heads in a sudden spurt of ichor, and it howled its pain. But the other two heads lashed back, ripping great wounds in the man-thing's side. Black blood flowed down his side and he collapsed in pain. A moment later saw him vanish out of existence like a mirage.

Darmon smiled, and the dragon lurched towards Ylana, trailing dark blood from the severed neck. But a wave of dark twisted rats came boiling up from the deck beneath it and swarmed over the wounded creature, dragging it down to be devoured. For a moment Faren thought it might be over, but then the two created more monsters, which fought and howled and died on the decks. Jericho and the crew were still fast behind Ylana, their faces pale under their tans as they watched the duel.

The sorcerers were both staggering now, barely able to keep on their feet. Faren could see dark sweat staining Darmon's clothes, but the pirate was grinning. The energies took more and more fantastic shapes, nightmares and monstrosities made real, appearing and disappearing in seconds. It made Faren dizzy, and he looked away for an instant.

At that moment something happened. His eyes averted, Faren didn't see it, but Darmon did. He made a clutching gesture and a great serpent of blue fire encircled Ylana, holding her tight, crushing her shield of light against her. She screamed in rage and pain, and struggled but couldn't free herself. Darmon laughed a terrible laugh, and the pirates began to shuffle

Artwork by Gail Butler

forward, shouting for him to finish the struggling Ylana.

The talisman on Faren's chest fluttered then, like a wounded gull. Faren looked up, startled, and could *feel* Ylana staring at him, eyes no longer distant now, but focused on him in rage and pain and a curious insistence. The pain of his wound disappeared, and Faren knew what to do.

Fumbling with blood-slicked hands, he lifted his knife and carefully wrapped the talisman chain around the hilt. None of the pirates paid the slightest bit of attention to him, intent as they were on their master's victory. Faren could feel the knife beginning to pulsate as he lifted it, the talisman glowing now. Then, mustering the last of his strength, he hurled it towards Darmon's back.

As he threw he knew that he hadn't thrown it hard enough. But that didn't seem to matter. Whirling end over end the blade flew, tearing through Darmon's protective shields with a hiss. Startled, the pirate began to turn but before he could take a step the knife sank deep into his back. Darmon screamed, a cry of rage and fear. The pirate staggered forward and collapsed to one knee, concentration shattered. The fire serpent encircling Ylana winked out in an instant. As his vision grayed, Faren could see Ylana stepping towards Darmon, blade raised, a demonic grin on her face. Darmon screamed again, from very far away, it seemed to Faren ....

He stood on a gray beach by the ocean, the surf roaring in time with his heart. Out of the shoals rose two dark shadows, one a crooked and snarling nightmare, the other a grinning skeleton covered in a rotting sheet. Ylana appeared before him, pointing at him in command. "Choose!" she said, her voice echoing inside him. Before his eyes the skeleton changed into Darmon, and then himself, flesh falling away from his skull. His heart faltered, each beat an explosion of pain, and then grew still. Faren screamed into the silence, his words swallowed up. The demon-thing turned, its terrible dark eyes blazing, scooped him up in a twisted claw, tossing him into its gaping maw ...

Faren awoke with a start. His head was buzzing and he ached all over. He looked around, but could only see shadows. "Where am I?" he croaked.

"You're aboard the *Eye of Heaven*. You'll be fine. You've been unconscious for a few days. Just relax. Your body is trying to adjust." A lantern flared, its light revealing Ylana sitting at the foot of the bunk, Jericho standing beside her looking grim.

"What happened?" A sudden spasm shook him. He shivered and clutched at the rough blankets.

Jericho coughed, and then spoke. "With Darmon gone, we were able to rout the pirates. They lost their taste for fighting after she set a few of her monsters on them." Jericho glanced at Ylana and then continued. "The hull had a few cracks from the collision. She patched them and whistled us up a fair wind. We'll be reaching port soon." He coughed again, a bit self-consciously. "Listen, Faren ... there's no easy way to say this. The crew has named me the new captain and —" He stopped again, looking a little embarrassed. Faren looked at him, curious. Ylana sat, motionless. The mate straightened up then and continued on in a voice of iron. "Faren, I've decided to release you from the crew." Faren stared at him, shocked, but Jericho wouldn't meet his eye. "You'll be put ashore at Golgamoth with Ylana. You can travel with her or not, as you please." He looked at Faren then, and gave a nod. "Good luck, boy." With that he turned and silently left the cabin, leaving Faren gaping after him.

Faren turned back to Ylana. "He released me — but why? What's happened?" A wave of nausea swept him. The buzzing in his head grew louder. Suddenly Faren felt another presence in the room. He looked around and saw no one. "Ylana? What happened?"

She sighed. "Faren, you were dying. The problem with sorcery is that, like most things, destroying is easier than creating. You saved my life. I had to do something."

He stared at her. She stared back, jaw set. "Ylana. What did you do to me?"

Gently she took his hand and laid it on his chest. With a shock he realized he couldn't feel his heartbeat. "What have you done to me?" he whispered. He tore open his shirt to see the demonspawn rune twisting on his chest. He stared at it, horrified. The rune crawled across his chest, a silver mass cold as the grave. The buzzing in his head grew clearer, dark whispers from far away. He looked back at Ylana, the full realization of what she had done sinking in. "You made me just like you."

"Yes. With Darmon dead, his demon required a new ... vessel. So I decided to place it within you. It saved your life. And it does give certain ... advantages." She stared at him, expressionless. "Power. Magic. The ability to lead, to fight, to kill. That is what you wanted, isn't it? To be a sorcerer and a hero?" She laughed bitterly.

"And damned," he whispered. "I should kill you."

Ylana laughed again, short and bitter. "Maybe you will, someday. Darmon thought he might." She gave a half-smile. "He was my last apprentice. I tried to teach him how to control it, but it drove him mad."

Faren could only lie there, stunned. In his head he could hear the demon whispering to him. He tried to ignore it and looked back at the sorceress and saw the sympathy in her eyes. "Will it drive me mad too?" he whispered.

"Perhaps. But not if you're strong enough. First you need to learn how to keep it from killing you." Above decks the crew could be heard hurrying about in their preparations to dock. She took his hand, her fingers cool and dry and her pale eyes now sad. "Since you're awake, we'll begin the first lesson. Focus on me."

❄

Jon Hansen was born and raised in Athens, Georgia. He developed a love of books at an early age and his love of fantasy, science fiction and all things impossible appeared soon after. Harboring a secret desire to become a writer, he attended the University of Georgia, where he earned a bachelor's degree in English and a master's in instructional technology, got married, and was adopted by three cats. Last year he, his wife Lisa and the cats moved to Bloomington, Indiana, to attend Indiana University, where he is now working towards his master's in library and information science. *Demonheart* is his first professionally published work.

Gail Butler is well-known in the Northwest as an artist and a fan. She is an ex-military-wife, musician, barber, and an antique restorer as well as an expert at drawing figures and animals. In her spare time she is a volunteer Jewish mother to Northwest art fandom.

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Eat at Ro's

by Julia S. Mandala

Iron–shod feet stamping in rhythm against the hard–packed road announced the troops' impending arrival. Standing by the cast–iron camp oven, the fire's heat radiating against my legs, I squinted through the dust cloud that sparkled in the noon light. The soldiers were an ugly human–goblin mix, the emperor's own magically blended race — smarter than goblin, stronger than man, in battle deadlier than either.

"Humagobs," I said to the willow–thin young man beside me. "Get ready." Benji nodded vigorously.

Benji scurried toward the wagon to fetch the bowls. His ribs showed through rents in the slave's tatters he wore, and his ragged black hair made his face look positively gaunt. *I've got to get some meat on that boy,* I thought for the hundredth time. But no amount of food could keep pace with Benji's growth spurts.

Turning to the large cauldron that hung over a crackling fire, I threw a handful of herbs into the bubbling stew and gave it a last stir. The troops were almost upon us, the scent of their unwashed animal bodies fouling the savory smell of meat and onions coming from the cauldron. I took up position by the road and Benji shook the copper handbell. Its clear tone rang across the scorched wasteland. Glaring at the humagobs, I shouted over the din, "Hurry up. This food won't wait forever."

The humagob captain raised a hand, his razor–sharp claws sending a shiver through my body. The line of soldiers drew to a halt.

"Well, sit on down," I snapped. No self–respecting imperial official wasted courtesy on humagobs.

The humagob captain's black gaze roved across my camp, taking in every detail.

"Come on. Your men are hungry, aren't they, Captain?" I demanded. "'Course they are, big strapping men like th—"

His clawed hand closed around my neck, expertly tightening just enough to cut off speech, but not enough to slice through flesh. My heart thudded against my rib cage.

"What this, wench?" the humagob croaked suspiciously, his words barely recognizable. *Must have got his tongue from the goblin side of the family.* Keeping my face a calm mask, I tapped against his hand. He released his hold so I could speak.

Dusting myself off, I said, "This, Captain, is Mistress Rowena's Famous Battle Kitchen."

His cocked head gave him a sort of spaniel look. "What be battle kitchen?"

"Just the finest portable kitchen ever to follow soldiers going into battle." I pushed aside my tangled auburn hair and puffed out my chest to display the imperial star I wore like a badge of honor.

The humagob captain looked mollified. "You from emperor?"

"They don't hand these stars out to just anyone," I said. "The emperor wants his troops well fed. An army travels on its stomach, you know." He grunted as I smacked his gut with a jovial palm. "Got to have sustenance for when you go a–raping and a–pillaging, I always say."

Standing at my elbow, Benji nodded vigorously.

"Who he?" the humagob captain asked, jabbing a black claw at Benji's chest.

"Oh, don't you mind him," I said cheerily. "Benji's my help. He don't talk none. The emperor's troops cut out his tongue when he were a young lad. No doubt he deserved it, the scamp." I swatted Benji on the rear. "Don't stand around, boy, start filling bowls for the gentlemen." I bowed, sweeping my arms to the right, where we had already spread rows of blankets across the barren, rocky ground. The emperor's conquered realms often ended up thus — burned and blasted by fire and magic, just blackened rocks interrupted by a few dying trees and twisted shrubs.

Still bowing, I said, "Come on, gentlemen, rest your weary hooves and fill your bellies before you go into battle."

I felt beady black eyes on my chest again, but this time they weren't looking at my imperial star. I'd forgotten how much cleavage this old rag of a dress showed when I bent over. Oh, I had their attention now, I did. Quickly, I straightened and led them to the blankets, only belatedly realizing what an invitation that might seem after giving them a good peek at my personal assets.

"Hurry with them bowls, Benji." I couldn't keep the nerves from my voice. But as I'd suspected, the filthy creatures hadn't had a decent meal in days, and the sight and smell of food turned their thoughts from me. For now.

"Wench," called the humagob cap-

tain as Benji handed him a steaming bowl. "What this?"

"The best stew in the empire, Captain."

He gave me the spaniel look again. "Biscuit?"

Resisting the urge to pat his head, I said, "Still baking, sir. They'll be right out." My gaze flitted across the uncouth assemblage. About fifty soldiers. Not a bad day's work —

I blinked in surprise as I spotted two tall, slender men with elegant, pointed ears. Quite good–looking, too, with startlingly blue eyes and long silver hair neatly combed. Their light-brown uniforms were immaculate. *Black Elves?* I wondered, my skin prickling. Those elves who had turned from the path of light to perform dark magic for the emperor were even more dangerous than the humagobs. Casually, I strolled over to where the elves sat slightly apart from the others.

"*B'rin helie,*" I said, giving the traditional elven greeting. I don't pretend to speak Elf fluently, but I've picked up a few phrases in my travels.

"*Helie hal,* little sister," said the taller of the two elves.

Benji froze like a statue. A sharp look from me got him going again. But the elf's words had stunned me no less. We didn't often hear rebel code out in the wastelands that the emperor held so firmly. The elf casually pushed aside his pale hair. On his neck was tattooed a silver tree, the symbol of the Elven Brotherhood of Light.

"Perhaps you elven brothers would care for something besides stew," I said, holding back the questions I was wild to ask. "I know you don't care for meat."

The shorter elf smiled crookedly. "Much appreciation, little sister."

I rushed back to the cookfires. The burlap bags holding my supplies lay near the cast–iron oven. From my personal stores, I pulled out two apples, some cheese, and a loaf of bread still soft enough it wouldn't break teeth.

The humagob crew was well into their stew, though some were wearing as much as they got into their mouths. It didn't matter. The stew worked either way. Already, their beady black eyes were glazing over.

"Here you are, elven brothers." I handed them the fresh fare. "Tell me, friends. Why do you travel with the Dark Emperor's humagob scum?"

The elves' bright blue eyes watched the humagobs closely as their claws went slack and empty bowls toppled onto the blankets. Amusement pulled at the shorter elf's lips.

"We've heard of Rowena's Famous Battle Kitchen," he said.

"Which," the taller one added with a sly smile, "we all know has nothing to do with feeding the emperor's hungry troops."

Fear touched my spine as I glanced at the humagobs, whose features were running together in a nauseating fashion. The elves turned their gazes on me. Their eyes were so bright. Too bright.

"Benji!" I called as I raced toward the camp oven.

Hearing the alarm in my voice, Benji dove behind the cast–iron box.

The spell hit an instant later, pounding against my wards like a battering ram at the castle gates. My imperial star glowed red, telling me the shield from magic held strong. *Stupid, stupid!* I chided myself. No reason a Dark Elf couldn't get the same tattoo as the Elven Brotherhood. Heck, they might even have *been* members of the Brotherhood before they turned to dark magic.

Benji crawled around the fire to squat behind me and my protection.

Pie, I mouthed at him. He nodded vigorously and reached for the gooseberry pie I always kept handy when my kitchen was open for business.

I hurled the pie at the taller elf. He ducked, but luck was with me. The pie shattered over the shorter elf in a gooseberry-and-pie crust mess. I shouted the incantation. The elf jerked around, his eyes wide with surprise, as the paralysis spell kicked in.

"Bless those delayed reaction spells," I muttered. The spell activated only after it had passed any wards that would keep active magic from reaching its target. A good spell to have. Unfortunately, I hadn't planned on trouble and didn't have another paralysis pie in reserve.

The tall elf's next spell shook my wards like thunder. My imperial star faded to orange. Time to get serious.

"Biscuits," I said to Benji.

Nodding, he opened the oven door with a stick and drew out a flat pan. Ah, perfect. A beautiful golden brown. I grabbed one lightly and threw it before my fingers could protest the heat. The biscuit arced through the air and

Artwork by Dameon Willich

Artwork by Dameon Willich

landed at the elf's foot, exploding in a flaky, buttery ball of destruction. One that bounced harmlessly off the elf's wards.

"That slimeworm is well–shielded," I grumbled. I grabbed another biscuit and tossed. Another explosion shook the ground. The Black Elf's wards still held. As I released the third biscuit, his counterattack came, this time with the sinuous subtlety of a snake, twisting, probing, seeking the weakest point of my wards. The orange glow on my imperial star flashed right through yellow and darkened toward green as the spell began boring into the weak spot. It would reach blue when his spell pierced mine. And then the spell would pierce me. And that would be the end of Rowena and her Famous Battle Kitchen.

"Not yet, my friend, not just yet," I vowed, my brain frantically making and discarding plans. A slow smile spread across my face. "What's dinner without a good wine?"

Benji looked puzzled, but dug through a sack and extracted a dusty brown bottle.

"A very good year," I said, my eyes straying to the dark green star. "What a waste." I bit into the cork, pulling it from the bottle with my teeth. Giving Benji a last encouraging grin, I scrambled to my feet and lunged toward the Black Elf, shouting at the top of my lungs. I splashed the bottle's contents across his body. His hands swiped ineffectually at the crimson stains soaking his light brown uniform. Understanding dawned on his face a split second before I smashed the empty bottle over his head. He collapsed to the ground in a limp heap. The ward serpent disappeared.

Now that his own wards were down, I cast a simple paralysis spell on him before he could regain his senses. "Well, Benji," I said, my shoulders sagging in relief, "let's break camp."

He caught my arm, pointed at the two paralyzed elves, and made a slashing motion across his neck. I swallowed hard, at once tempted and appalled. The gods alone knew how many people they had betrayed, but —

"I can't just slit their throats while they're lying there helpless."

Benji threw up his hands in disgust.

"I know it doesn't make sense, after all the troops we've melted the past few months, but ..." I shrugged, trying to put into words a distinction I only instinctively understood. "That was war, a surprise attack. They could have fought back. These elves are our prisoners. If we slaughter them without a proper trial, we're no better than the scum we're fighting."

Benji glared. Sighing, I hiked up my skirt and from a boot sheath pulled a slim dagger, the kind favored by cutpurses in the marketplace. Not surprising, since I used to be one, once upon a time before the emperor's troops conquered my land, before I devoted myself to learning the magic that would avenge the loss of those I loved. But such loss had taught me well that a life once taken can never be restored.

"Can *you* do it?" I asked.

Benji took the dagger from my outstretched hand. His slender frame rigid with determination, he strode to the taller elf, grabbed a handful of silver hair and jerked up his head. The elf's blue eyes were wild with fear, but he could do nothing to defend himself. Benji placed the dagger's sharp edge against the elf's exposed throat. And froze. Tears welled up in Benji's eyes as he stood poised on the edge of killing. Sobs shook his body. The elf's hair slipped through Benji's fingers, and the traitor's head flopped against the ground.

I took the dagger from Benji's clenched fist and tossed it on the ground. He threw himself into my arms, his hot tears soaking the shoulder of my dress.

"There, now," I said soothingly. "Refusing to kill is strength, not weakness."

Benji pulled back, nodding and sniffling. He drew out a well–worn pocket cloth and blew his nose loudly. When he'd pulled himself together, we used the metal poles made for the purpose to lift the heavy camp stove off the fire. Hefting a burlap bag, I glanced around at the brown puddles dotted with dumplings of melted flesh that used to be the Dark Emperor's humagob troops. Soon they would evaporate, leaving no trace other than a few brown stains on my blankets. But those would wash out. The two Black Elves were another matter.

"That paralysis spell will last a couple of days," I said. "What say we give these two a ride to the Free Territory and let their brother elves judge them? We need supplies anyway."

Benji nodded his assent.

When the humagobs had dried up, the stove had cooled, and we had stowed everything onto the wagon, Benji hitched up our old black nag —

one so bony and swaybacked not even the emperor's troops would bother conscripting it. We climbed onto the wooden seat.

I took up the leather reins, then sighed and lowered my arms. "Well, Benji, it's clear the Dark Emperor knows about us and was worried enough to send some high–powered assassins. Should we risk that he'll send more, or should we stay in the Free Territory?"

Benji's serious expression dissolved into a reckless grin. I grinned back.

"Onward, then." I flicked the reins across old Midnight's back. The horse leaned into the harness, and the wagon creaked as it started to roll. "A few supplies, then Rowena's Famous Battle Kitchen will be open again for business."

Benji nodded vigorously.

❄

Julia S. Mandala is a Kansas City native now living in Plano, Texas. She has wanted to be a writer for as long as she can remember. After an eight–year stint as a labor attorney, she is now a full–time writer and has just completed her first fantasy novel. This is her fourth sale to this magazine.

Dameon Willich is a Seattle-based artist who keeps his own small herd of horses and is director of the Seattle Knights Equestrian/Show Troupe.

The Last Word

Like Marion, I too mourn Elsie Wollheim, whose respect for my editorial skills provided a powerful incentive to live up to her standards, and whose affection helped make my business trips to New York a pleasure. If Elsie was Marion's adopted mother, she was one of my adopted grandmothers.

We have some great lineups coming: stories by Karen Anderson, Jo Clayton, Dorothy Heydt, Ardath Mayhar, Julia S. Mandala, Huan-Hua Chye, Tracey S. Rosenberg, John P. Buentello, Cynthia McQuillin, Patricia Russo, and Jacqueline Shank. Perhaps best of all, Mary C. Aldridge, the author of our only Nebula-nominated story — yet — has sent us another story, called "The Knife That Makes Men".

To match all these great stories, we have commissioned cover art from Nick Jainschigg and Margaret Organ-Kean, and interior art from Vincent DiFate, Armand Cabrera, Alan Gutierrez, Barb Armata, and other excellent illustrators.

There's a perception in some circles that illustrators really aren't true artists, but I would vehemently deny this allegation. The artists who work on our stories actually read them, often take the time to research correct details to draw, and bring their own hearts and minds to the work the author has done, amplifying their own perceptions for the benefit of you, the reader. From the comments we receive daily in the mail, you appreciate their efforts, too. Thanks.

In fact, the mailbag has been bulging lately — we actually had more letters than we could print this time. We are always interested in your comments, so if you have strong reactions to the stories or the artwork, let us know. (But unless you specifically ask us not to, all letters we receive are considered for inclusion in the letter column.)

We hope you'll check out our Web page (http://www.well.com/user/mzbfm/). We update it more frequently than we publish issues on paper, and we can use color. So we're displaying covers that relate to our author interviews, providing additional bibliographic information, and so on.

— *Rachel E. Holmen*

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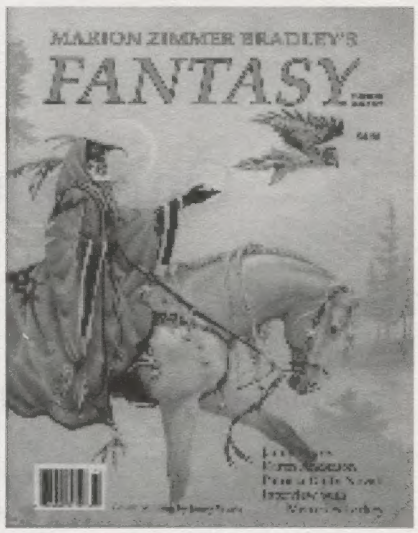

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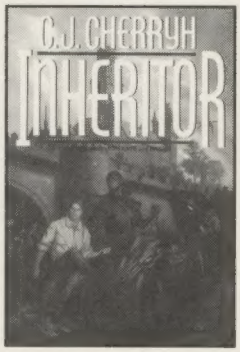

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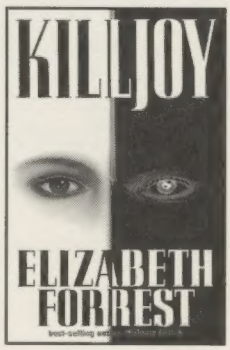

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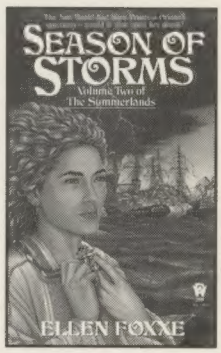

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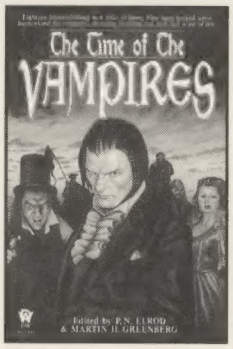

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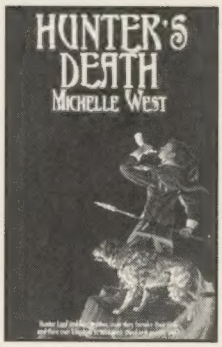

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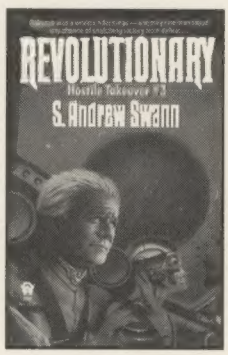

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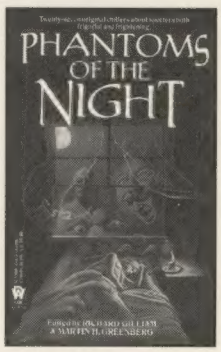

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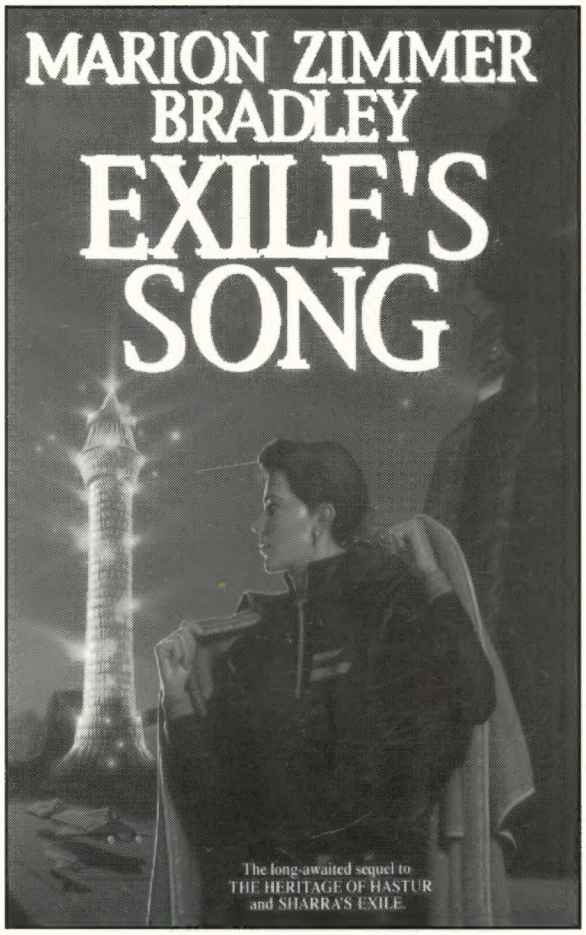

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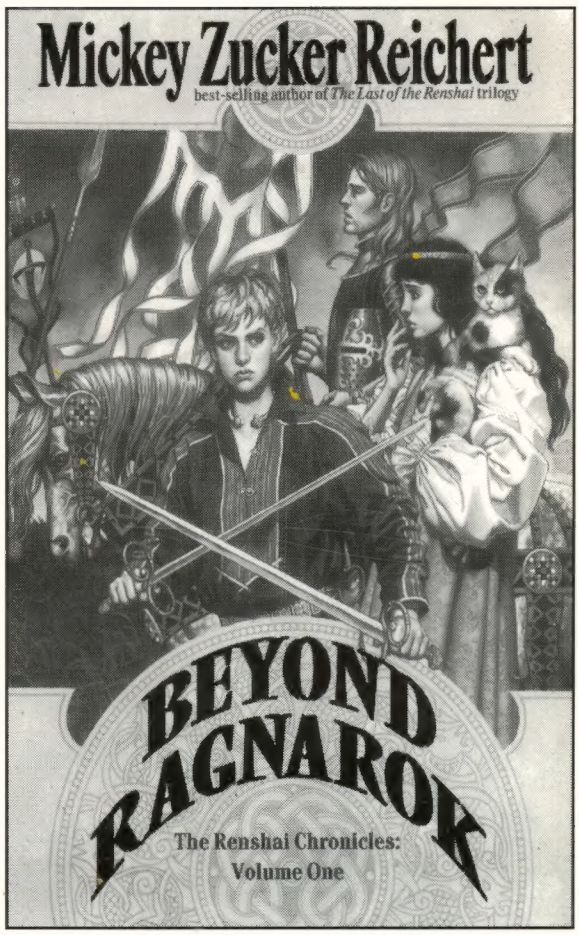

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